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WHAT A MAN WILLS

VAIZEY

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By Mrs. George De Horne Vaizey

A Question of Marriage

An Unknown Lover

Lady Cassandra

What a Man Wills

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"FOR THERE, BUT A COUPLE OF YARDS AWAY, STOOD THE DREAM WOMAN, HER EYES GAZING STEADILY INTO HIS." (*See page 103*)

From a drawing by A. C. Michael

What a Man Wills

By

Mrs. Geo. de Horne Vaizey

Author of "An Unknown Lover," "Lady Cassandra," etc.

G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York and London
The Knickerbocker Press
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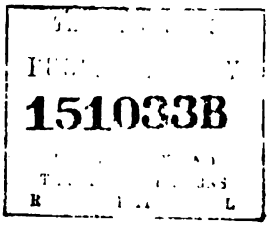
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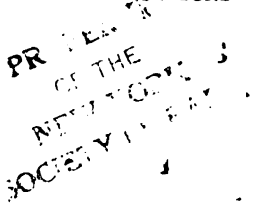

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WHAT A MAN WILLS

I

AT THE DYING OF THE YEAR

THE New Year festivities were over; in the hall of the old country Manor the guests had danced and sung, had stood hand in hand in a widening circle, listening to the clanging of bells in the church-tower near by. Now, with much hooting and snorting of motors, the visitors from afar had departed to their homes, and the members of the house-party had settled themselves by the log fire for the enjoyment of a last chat.

There were eleven people left around the fire, counting the host and hostess, four men, and five girls, all young, as youth is counted in these days, the women averaging about twenty-four or five, the men a few years older, and in the mellow light of the fire, and of the massed candles in the old

brass sconces on the walls, they looked a goodly company. They belonged, it was easy to see, to the cultured classes; whatever might be their means or present position, these people had been born of gentlefolks, had been educated according to the traditions of their kind, and were equipped with the weapons of courtesy and self-control, which had descended to them as a heritage from those passed and gone. Mentally, they might be guilty of anger and impatience; mentally, they might rage and storm—that was their own business, and concerned no one but themselves; in the presence of their fellow-creatures they could be trusted to present a smiling front.

There are occasions, however, when the most reserved natures are tempted to unclose, and of these the opening of the New Year is surely the most seductive. When the guests have departed, and the laughter is stilled, when for a last half-hour men and women sit quietly over the fire, there arises in the mind a consciousness of severance with the past, a sense of newness, which is not untouched with awe.

A new year has opened—what will it bring? What gifts, what losses, lie awaiting in its lap? When its last hour trembles away on the striking of a deep twelfth chime, what will happen to me?

Where shall I be? In the language, the consciousness of earth—*shall I be at all?*

The tall dark girl, who had borne herself so proudly during the dance, shivered and bent forward to warm her hands at the fire.

"Whew! It's eerie!" she cried. "How I hate new years, and birthdays, and anniversaries that make one think! What's the use of them, anyway? One ambles along quite contentedly in the daily rut—it's only when one's eyes are opened to see that it *is* a rut. . . ."

"And that there are a solid three hundred and sixty-five days of it ahead!" chimed in the man with the firm chin and the tired eyes. "Exactly! Then one pants to get out."

"And bowl triumphantly along the road in a C-spring carriage, or the very latest divinity in motor-cars!" laughed the beauty who sat in the corner of the oak settle, agreeably conscious that the background was all that could be desired as a foil to her red-gold hair, and that the dim light shed a kindly illusion over a well-worn frock. "I object to ruts of every kind and persuasion. They disagree with me, and make me cross, and I'm so nice when I'm pleased! The parsons say that prosperity makes people hard and selfish, but it is just the other way about with me. When

there's not enough to go round—well, naturally, I keep it all for myself; but so long as I have everything I want, I *like* other people to be happy. I really do! I'd give them everything that was over."

She looked around with a challenging smile, and the others obediently laughed and applauded. It was fashionable to have a new rôle, and it was Claudia's rôle to be honest, and quite blatantly selfish. She was pretty enough to carry it off, and clever enough to realize that her plain speaking served as a blind. No one believed for a moment that she was speaking the truth, whereas, if she had not distracted attention by waving this red flag, they must certainly have discovered the truth for themselves. Claudia's god was self; she would have seen her best friend cut up into mincemeat, to provide herself with a needed *hors d'œuvre.*

The tall man with the large head and the sharp, hawklike features, sprang to his feet, and stood in the centre of the circle, aflush with excitement.

"Ruts!" he repeated loudly. "What's the matter with us all is we're *content* with ruts! The thing which depresses me most at the beginning of a year is to look back and realize the futility, the weakness, the lack of progress. Great heavens!

how much longer are we to be content with ruts? Our youth is passing; in a short time it will have gone. What have we done with our years? If we had been worthy the name, we should have been done with ruts by now, they would have been paved over with a smooth white path—the path to fortune! We should have walked along it—our own road, a private road, forbidden to trespassers!"

A girl seated on an oak stool, in the shadow of the settle, raised her quiet eyes, and watched him while he spoke. She was a slim, frail thing, with hair parted in the centre and coiled flatly round her head. She had taken the lowest seat, and had drawn it into the shadow, but now she leaned forward, and the firelight searched her face. She was not beautiful, she was not even pretty, she was small and insignificant, she had made no effort to join in the conversation, and now, as John Malham finished speaking, she shrank back into her corner, and became once more a frail, shadowy shape; nevertheless, a beholder who had been vouchsafed that one glimpse would have found himself turning once and again to that shaded corner. He would have wanted to see that girl again; he would have been conscious of a strange attraction towards her; he would have asked himself curiously was it liking, or—hate?

The girl said nothing, but a man by her side punctuated the pause by a laugh. He was a handsome fellow, with a bright, quizzical face and a pair of audacious blue eyes.

"Oh, be hanged to fortune!" he cried loudly. "Be hanged to flagged paths! They're the deepest ruts of all, if you could but see it. What's wrong with us all is lethargy, slackness, the inability to move of our own accord. What we get matters nothing, it's the *getting* that counts! Why, when I think of the whole wide world lying open, waiting, beckoning, and of fellows like myself pacing every day of our lives in a square mile cage in the City, I—I—" (he snapped his fingers in a frenzy of impatience) "I wonder how long I can carry my chains! They'll snap some day, and I'll be off, and it will be a long good-bye to the civilized world."

The girl in the blue dress looked at him with wistful eyes, but she laughed more gaily than ever, and cried:

"Wait, please, till after the dance on the tenth, and when you *do* go, send home things to us, won't you? Shawls and cashmeres, and embroideries. And pearls! I've always longed to know a real live pearl-fisher. He ought to remember us, oughtn't he, everybody—because we've been so

kind and patient with his vagaries? We all deserve something, but bags Me the pearls!"

"Oh, you shall have your pearls right enough," said the handsome man, but there was a careless tone in his voice which made the promise seem worthless as sand, and he never glanced in the direction of the girl in the blue dress.

Pretty, wistful little Norah Boyce looked up quickly as if she were about to speak; thought better of it, and turned back to stare into the fire.

The girl seated on the oak stool leaned forward once again, and looked straight into the face of the handsome man. One white hand rested against her throat, a slim column of a throat, bare of ornament. • Her fingers moved as though in imagination they were fingering a rope of pearls.

Buried in the depth of a great arm-chair lay the form of a giant of a man who had listened to the conversation with a sleepy smile. At this point a yawn overcame him; he struggled with it, only to find himself entangled in a second.

"I say," he drawled lazily, "what about bed? Doesn't that strike you as about the most sensible proposition for the moment? I know this dissatisfied feeling. No New Year's gathering is complete without it. Best thing to get to sleep as soon as possible, and start afresh next day.

Things look better after coffee and bacon. What's the use of grizzling? If we can't have what we want, let us like what we can get. Eh? It's pretty certain we'll never get what we want."

"Are you so sure of that?" asked a quiet voice. The hostess sat erect in her seat, her graceful head with its silvering hair silhouetted against the wall. She looked round the circle of her guests, and smiled, a fine, delicate smile. "When you make that statement, Frank, you are contradicting flatly all the premises of modern thought. The time has passed for sitting still and lamenting the impossible. The time is past for calling anything impossible. The thing that a man strives for—deeply, strongly, persistently—*that thing he can have!* That is the theory held by many great thinkers of to-day. And it is *true.*"

There was silence for a moment, while everyone looked questioningly at the figure of the speaker. The man with the tired eyes asked a question:

"I suppose that applies to women as well as to men! Have *you* proved it, Mrs. Ingram?"

"I have proved it," answered the quiet voice. The host leaned forward, and knocked the ash of his cigarette into the grate. His face was hidden from view. Mrs. Ingram looked round with a sudden, challenging smile. "*Why don't you all prove it?*"

she cried. "Why don't you all start forth on this year with an aim in view? I don't say you will gain it in one year, or in two, or possibly in a dozen; but if you care enough to go on trying, it *will* be gained! It's a question of one big aim instead of a dozen. The lesser things must go; you must become a man, a woman, of one idea. There are other things which are good and pleasant and alluring, but they must be set aside as weights which would hamper the chase. You cannot have the one big thing—and everything else! Therefore it is well to ask oneself seriously at the beginning—*Is it worth while?*"

Once more the guests were silent, staring into the heart of the fire. That last question, uttered in a deep, grave tone, had called to the bar those inner voices which had so long breathed envy and discontent. Each listener examined his own motives, and knew a chill of doubt, but the chill passed, and the conviction remained. Each one felt convinced that life held no good outside the coveted goal.

The silence gave assent, as Mrs. Ingram realized without need of further words.

"Suppose," she said gently, "you make me your father confessor to-night, and confess your various aims and ambitions? It is the sort of confession appropriate to a New Year's dawn, and perhaps

the very putting into words will vitalize your dreams and take them the first step towards becoming realities. You must *all* confess, remember! There must be no holding back; if one begins the rest must follow, and after the confessions have been made, we must pledge ourselves to help each other towards our separate goals, if not by material aids, by reinforcing his will with our own!"

The girl in blue laughed lightly, and cried: "Oh, let's! Let's all confess, and then, years afterwards, when we are old, and wear transformations, we'll meet again, at the dying of the year, and sit round the Yule log, and tell the stories of our lives. And if we have failed, we will weep salt tears of disappointment; and if we have succeeded, we'll weep more, because it's all hollow and stuffed with bran, and we'll make pious reflections, and sigh: 'Oh, me! Oh, my!' and preach sermons to the youngsters, and they won't believe a word. And so it will all begin over again. Juliet, you set the ball rolling, by speaking of ruts. You ought to be the first to confess. What is the secret longing of your heart?"

The dark girl showed no sign of embarrassment at being chosen to lead the way. There was no sign of shrinking or hesitation upon her face; on

the contrary, at the sound of that penetrating question, the careless smile died away, and her features seemed suddenly to glow with life.

"*Adventure!*" she cried quickly. "Give me that, and, for good or ill, I shall be satisfied. Fate made me with a vagrant's heart shut up in a woman's body, and for twenty-four years it's been fed on monotony in a country parish. Since I left the schoolroom I've never had a real experience of my own. I've had trivial pleasures, never one real big joy; never"—she looked slowly, thoughtfully, from face to face—"*never a grief!* There's something here"—she laid her hand on her heart—"fighting to get out! The ordinary, quiet, comfortable life would not content it. It wants more. It wants happenings, changes, excitement—it wants the big world, and I am a prisoner in the castle of convention. Mrs. Ingram, how does your prophecy apply to me? How am I to get out?"

"No prison is so strong that it cannot be pulled down, Juliet. The walls of Jericho fell at the sound of the trumpet. But you must discover your own trumpet, and the walls won't fall at the first flourish," said Mrs. Ingram, and then suddenly and incontinently she added: "Poor child!"

"Just so! Miss Juliet will certainly be one of

those who will sigh: 'Woe's me!' at our future merry meeting," cried the tall man with the hawk-like features, "and it's rough on her, too, for she's so touchingly modest in her desire. Doesn't care a pin apparently whether she comes out better or worse! Now, for my own part, that's all I *do* care for. Success! Success! that's my mania: forging ahead, gaining on my opponents, winning the lead. Adventure doesn't count. I'd sit at an office desk for fourteen hours out of the twenty-four, for fourteen years at a stretch, if it ensured success at the end—a big success, a success which left me head and shoulders above the ruck. I'd walk the world barefooted from one end to the other to gain a secret that was worth while. Success is my god. To gain it I would sacrifice everything else."

"Then, of a certainty, it can be yours," said Mrs. Ingram quietly, and she looked at him with such a gentle glance that he asked her a laughing question: "Are you going to call me 'poor child!' too?"

"Not yet," she said quietly. Then she turned to the big man, and laid a hand on his arm. "You next, Frank?"

"Oh, well!" he laughed good-humouredly yet with a tinge of embarrassment. "I didn't bargain

for this confession business, but since it's the rule, I must follow suit, I suppose. I'm a commonplace beggar! I'm pretty well content with things as they come. I'm not keen on any adventures that I know of; if I can have enough to be comfortable, that's all I want. I'd like a nice wife, and a house with a bit of garden; and a youngster or two, and a runabout car, don't you know, and the usual accessories! That's about all I fancy. 'Man wants but little here below.'"

"Frank plumps for comfort," said Mrs. Ingram, smiling. "His programme sounds distinctly restful, for a change. Take care of your figure, Frank! I should suggest mowing the garden as a helpful recreation. Next, please! Claudia!"

"Oh, money, please!" cried Claudia eagerly. "*Lots* of money, and a safe full of jewels. Do you know, I dress on forty pounds a year all told, and a rich cousin sends me cast-offs! I take them hungrily, but I hate her for it, and when I'm a millionaire I'll cut her dead. A German Jew stock-broker, dear, or a Maharajah of 'something-core,' or a soap-boiler without h's—anyone will do if he has enough money! I'd rather not, of course, but it's the only way! Dear people, will you *all* come to my wedding?"

"Claudia, you are impossible! You ought to be ashamed!"

"Yes, I should, but I'm not! Isn't it horrid of me? If I blow *very* loudly, do you think I shall go off this season?"

"Claudia speaks in her usual highly coloured fashion, but there's no doubt about her aim. She wants money, and, incidentally, all that it can buy.—Adventure. Success. Comfort. Money. We are getting plenty of variety! Rupert, what are you going to give us?"

The man with the tired eyes and the firm chin leaned forward in his seat, with his elbows resting on his knees and his chin supported in the hollow of his hands. The firelight showed the delicate network of lines round eyes and mouth, the modelling of the long curved lips.

"I—want—Love!" he said quietly, and a stir of amazement passed round the circle of listeners. He looked round and smiled, a slow, amused smile. "Surprised, aren't you? Didn't expect that from me; but it isn't as simple as it sounds. I'm not thinking of Frank's 'nice' wife, and a house in the suburbs, the usual midsummer madness followed by settling down to live—stodgily!—ever after. I'm speaking of something big, primal, overwhelming; something that *lasts*. Love comes to

most men in the course of their lives, a modicum of love. The dullest dog has his day, a day uplifted, glorified, when he walks like a god. Afterwards he looks back upon it from his padded arm-chair, and smiles—a smug smile. It was a moment of madness; now he is sane, that's *his* point of view; but mine happens to be precisely the opposite! To me those moments are life, the only life worth living. The rest is a sleep. If I could have what I wish, I'd choose to love, to *be* loved, like the great masters in the art, the lovers *par excellence* of the ages. I'd be willing, if needs be, to sacrifice everything else, and count the world well lost. It would be a love not only of the senses, but of the mind, of the soul, and so it would live on, undimmed by the passing of youth. That is my dream, you understand! As regards expectation, I don't share Mrs. Ingram's optimism. It's not only myself who is involved, you see. It is another person, and my desires are so absurdly in excess of my deserts. Who am I that I should expect the extraordinary?"

He ceased, and again the silence fell. The girl in blue bit hard on her under lip and shrank back into the shadow; the girl who had wished for adventure drew a quick gasp of excitement; the woman who had lived, and gained her desire,

drew a quivering sigh. Silent, immovable, in the shadow of the settle, sat the girl in white.

"Oh, dear!" cried Claudia suddenly. "If he *only* had money! I'd adore beyond all things to be worshipped on a pedestal! Rupert, if an old aunt dies, and leaves you her millions,—would I do?"

That was the best of Claudia, her prattle bridged so many awkward gaps! In an instant the tension had eased, and a general laugh broke the silence. Rupert laughed with the rest, no whit embarrassed by the question.

"Not at all, Beauty," he said calmly. "I need a great passion in return, and you are incapable of it. Most women are! I doubt if in the whole course of my life I have met one who could rise to it," and he cast a quick glance round the group until his eyes met those of his hostess.

"Very few men would understand what you are talking about, or, if they did, would desire so demanding a romance," Mrs. Ingram told him. "The man who *does* will find his mate, but—he must pay the price! So we have come to Love at last! I thought it would have taken an earlier place."

"Mrs. Ingram," cried Claudia boldly, "was *that* what you wished for yourself? You told us

you had proved your own theories. Did *you* wish for love?"

"No!" said the hostess quietly. "It was not love." She glanced across the hearth as she spoke, and her eyes and her husband's met, and exchanged a message.

The man with the magnetic eyes burst hastily into the conversation, as if anxious to divert attention to himself.

"I suppose I come next? I've been questioning myself while you've all been talking. It's difficult to condense one's ambitions into just one word, but I've got it at last—or the one which most nearly expresses what I mean. *Danger!* That's it. That's what I want. I'm fed up with monotony, and convention, and civilization, but I go a step farther than Miss Juliet, for I demand, so to speak, the superlative of adventure. Risk, uncertainty, the thrill, the fear! I want to take my life in my hands, to get out into the open of life, and come face to face with the unknown. Put me down as 'Danger,' Mrs. Ingram, and when you think over all the wishes, mine really seems the easiest of fulfilment. There's plenty of trouble knocking around, and a man need not have far to search. I think, on the whole, I'll absolve my friends from that prom-

ise to help! It might land them in disagreeable consequences!"

"But are we expected to wish you good luck? It really *is* an invidious position!" cried the girl in blue. She sighed, and twisted her fingers together in her lap.

"It's coming to my turn," she continued, "and I'm so horribly embarrassed, for my confession sounds the most selfish of all: I want just to be happy! That's all! But it means so much, and it's such a difficult thing to accomplish. Don't anyone *dare* to tell me that it's in my own power, and must be manufactured inside, because I've heard it so often, and it's not true! I need *outside* things, and I can't be happy till I get them. But I only want them so that I can be happy, and I'd give them up in a minute if *other* things would have the same effect. Don't I express myself lucidly and well? I'm a sweet, tender-hearted little girl, dear friends, and I ask for so little! Kind contributions gratefully received. Mrs. Ingram dear, you won't preach, will you?"

"Not for the world," cried Mrs. Ingram laughing. "Why shouldn't you be happy, Meriel dear? I am sure we all wish you a short quest, and a rich harvest! And what does Norah want?"

Mrs. Ingram's voice was a trifle apologetic as

she looked towards where Norah Boyce sat, turning her head from side to side to listen to the pronouncements of her fellow guests, sometimes serious, sometimes smiling, but always with that little wistful pucker of the brows which of late had become a settled expression. It seemed at the moment as if it would be more sensible to inquire what Norah did *not* want, for a very harvest of last straws had combined to break her back within the last two years. She was an orphan, but having been possessed of a moderate, but comfortable income (five hundred a year to wit), had contrived to lead a sufficiently full and agreeable life during the half-dozen years which had elapsed since she had left school. She paid visits, she travelled abroad with congenial friends, she had a room at a ladies' club, and stayed frequently as paying guest with such of her friends as were not overburdened with this world's wealth. Everyone was pleased to entertain a pretty, particularly sweet-tempered girl, and to receive five pounds a week for the privilege, for there was no meanness about Norah, she looked upon money simply as a means to an end, spent lavishly, and was as ignorant as a doll as to the investments from which her income arose. She knew by reference to her bank-book that a cheque for about a hundred pounds was due in

December, and was convenient for Christmas gifts, and that another—about fifty—arrived in time for the July sales. She knew that her receipts varied, but that, of course, was the result of a Liberal Government, and would come right with its fall from power! On one occasion a cheque never came at all, and it appeared that something had gone wrong in America, and that it never would come any more. Norah felt very indignant with her trustee, and was convinced that the loss was entirely his fault. She asked pathetically what was the *use* of having a trustee, and felt very Christian and forbearing, because she was quite civil to him when they next met,—from all which it will be gathered that Norah Boyce was a survival of the old-fashioned, unworldly, more or less helpless young women of a past generation. She had not been trained either to work, or to think for herself; her education had not specialized on any one subject; her value in the wage-earning market was exactly nil, and before the end of her twenty-fifth year her income had fallen to nearly the same point.

It had been a year of calamity. Everything went wrong. A European war sent down the prices of stocks and shares. A railway strike at home swallowed up dividends; a bank failed;

water leaked into an oil well, and dried up on a rubber plantation. Norah had no time to recover from one disaster before another burst upon her; while she was still sorrowfully digesting the fact that a summer remittance was not to hand, intelligence arrived that as regarded autumn payments, the trustee regretfully pronounced no dividends. In short, Fortune, having smiled upon the young woman for twenty-five years, had now turned her back with a vengeance, until eventually she was face to face with the fact that in future her work must be to earn, rather than to spend.

Mrs. Ingram had played her usual part of confidante and consoler during the year of upheaval, and the invitation had been given with the intention of allowing "the poor little dear time to think." It would not be tactful to exclude her from the general questioning that had sprung out of New Year confidences, but in her heart the hostess shrank from putting the question.

"And what do *you* want, Norah? I think it's your turn!"

Contrary to expectation Norah did not look at all perturbed. She shrugged her shoulders, and cried instantly, "Oh, Work, of course! Plenty of work. At once. With a handsome remuneration, paid quarterly in advance! It sounds very

moral and praiseworthy, but it isn't a bit. I'm not fond of work; I'd a great deal sooner go on amusing myself in my own way. I've never had one scrap of longing to be a bachelor girl, and live on my own, and cook sketchy meals on a greasy stove. I detest food in the raw, and should never be able to eat it, after contending with it in its earliest stages. I'd live on tea and nuts. But it's a got-to! I *must* earn money, so I must work. The trouble is to discover what I can do. . . I can think of thousands of things that I *can't!* . . . I can—with care—make five shillings go about as far as an ordinary person's half-crown, so I'm not exactly suited to be a housekeeper. I couldn't trim a hat to save my life, but I can alter one quite well. I'm clever at it. It's generally accomplished by first sitting on it, and then putting it on in the dark. You wouldn't believe how smart it can look! Do you think there'd be any chance of selling the patent? Or could I advertise in a fashion paper—'Lady remodels hats to latest mode. Send orders for two and six to N. B.'? . . . I can't write a book, or paint a picture, or teach a child over three, or nurse, or massage, or type, or keep a beauty parlour—or—or—or anything that working women *do* do! I might offer myself to the Educational Society, as a horrible example

of how a girl ought *not* to be brought up, and be exhibited on the platform at lectures. The work would be light, and I could wear pretty clothes, but I don't think it would be respectful to my parents. I think I must be a 'nice old-fashioned girl,' but there's no demand for old-fashioned girls to-day. Nobody wants them!"

"I don't agree with you there, Norah. I think there's a big demand," Mrs. Ingram said quickly, and from the men present came a deep murmur of agreement. No one present was in love with Norah Boyce herself, but all were in love with her type. She would make a charming wife, a delightful mother. To the end of her life she would probably have difficulties with cheques, and remain hopelessly mixed on political questions, but she would be a genius in the making of a home!

"You'll find your right niche, dear, I've no doubt of that. You mustn't allow yourself to despair before you begin your search." Mrs. Ingram continued smiling. "Your ambition, at any rate, is a thing in which we can all help. Please everybody remember Norah, and let her know at once if you hear of a suitable post! I think we must make a strong point of her disposition. Such a very sweet temper ought to be priced above rubies."

"I'll sell it cheap at three pounds a week!" said Norah ruefully, and there was a merry outburst of laughter. It died quickly, however, and a general expectation made itself felt, the echo of which sounded in Mrs. Ingram's voice.

"Only one more confession, and we have gone through our list. Lilith is hiding, as usual, but she shall not escape. Come out of your corner, you silent sprite, and tell us what gift you would ask of the Fates to-night!"

"A white moss rose!" drawled Claudia mockingly, but the ripple of laughter which usually followed her words was this time feeble and unreal.

Every eye was turned towards that darkened corner; the very fire, as though following the general example, threw up a long blue flame which flickered strangely over Lilith's face.

She moved forward with a noiseless deliberation; first, two tiny, white-shod feet gleamed upon the oak floor, then two small hands clasped on folds of satin; last of all, the small head with the tightly swathed hair, the small, straight features, and the curious light-rimmed eyes. For a long, silent moment she sat gazing before her. Her voice when she spoke had an unexpected depth and richness.

"I want," said Lilith slowly—"Power!"

Mrs. Ingram disapproved of anachronisms, and set her face sternly against electric lighting in her ancestral home. To-night, as every night, the retiring guests helped themselves to one of a row of silver candlesticks on a table near the staircase, and lit it with a match before beginning the ascent. Lilith was the last of the ladies to receive her candle; the last to receive the salutations of the four men. She raised her face to each in turn, and gazed deep in his eyes, while their hands met and parted, and to three men out of the four came, at that moment, a vision and a dream. The man who had wished for love, thrilled at the thought of a woman's eyes looking out of an unknown face, which yet would share some magical quality with those now looking into his own. John Malham saw in a vision an icy peak, sharp and white, and beautiful with a deadly beauty. The touch of her hand in his was cold and light as a snowflake. Val Lessing looked at the white column of her throat, and beheld round it ropes of pearls—lustrous, shimmering pearls for which a man might venture his life; but Francis, the giant, had no illusions—he was sleepy, and he thought of bed.

Alone in the great hall, husband and wife stood over the dying logs.

"Well, wonderful woman!" he said, "you have given us a wonderful evening, and now we must stand by, and watch those nine strugglers in the maelstrom. It will be interesting; it will be awful. How many of them do you suppose will win through to their goal?"

Mrs. Ingram did not answer his question; she asked another of her own accord:

"Did you notice," she said softly, "that no one, not one of them——"

"Wished your wish?" he finished for her. "Yes! I noticed!"

He laid his hands on her shoulders, and they stood together, gazing deeply into each other's eyes.

"But," she sighed softly, "it is the best!"

II

THE GIRL WHO WISHED FOR MONEY

CLAUDIA BERRINGTON prided herself that if she had many faults, she had at least one supreme virtue—she was honest! She condescended to no subterfuges, no half-truths, no beatings about the bush. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth fell from her coral lips with a nakedness which astonished her hearers, and this despite the fact that few people had less consideration for honesty for honesty's sake. There was no "I can, because I ought" in Claudia Berrington's composition; her outspokenness was simply a means to an end. Very early in life her sharp wits had mastered the fact that honesty was the best policy, and that to speak the truth was at once to disarm criticism and to avoid the danger of pitfalls.

To Claudia's supreme delight, she discovered that her adopted virtue was quite an asset in society. It was so uncommon, so arresting to

meet a girl who *really* said what she meant, that it made quite a sensation, when found. People said to one another: "Have you heard Claudia's latest?" and hung upon her lips in delighted anticipation of shocks. And Claudia duly shocked them, and enjoyed the process.

Openly, at the New Year's party, Claudia had confessed that the one overwhelming ambition of her heart was to be rich, and as there seemed only one way in which a helpless young woman could obtain a limitless command of money, had declared herself ready to marry the highest bidder in the market. "A German Jew stock-broker, or a Maharajah of 'something-core,' or a soap-boiler bereft of h's. Anyone will do!" she had cried, "if he can only give me enough." And in a *tête-à-tête* with a girl friend over her bedroom fire the same night, she had repeated and defended the same statement.

"Ashamed?" she cried, "why should I be ashamed? I'm not a bit! How can I help my own nature? Most girls put love before everything else. Well, so do I; but it's love for *myself*. I love myself better than any stupid young man, and I mean to make myself happy. I couldn't be happy without money, therefore money I must have, and if I find a man who is ready and willing to give it to me, why on earth should I refuse?"

The friend looked at the fair, delicately cut face with a pang of envy.

"You are so lovely, Claudia; you'll find him fast enough, and he'll worship you, and think you a paragon of virtue. It *is* unfair! A plain-looking girl who would have loved him back, and been amiable and devoted, would have no chance, whereas you will carry all before you. It *is* unfair!"

"Oh, I'll be quite sweet to him. I'll have to be, to keep him in a good temper. I'll be wickedly extravagant, you see, like all *nouveaux riches*, and I detest rows! Don't you worry about the man, dear. He'll be happy enough. So long as I get all I want, I'm quite easy to live with!"

"No one gets all one wants in life, Claudia," said the friend tritely. "All the money in the world can't protect you from the troubles which enter every life!"

"Perhaps not; but it can gild them! If I'm bound to have troubles, let me have them *de luxe*. A million or two can make anything picturesque. All the difference between sables and bombazine. Shouldn't I look sweet, Meriel, as a widow, with a Marie Stuart bonnet and a cloak of priceless sables? He might die, you know! You never can tell!"

Then Meriel had arisen and swept scornfully from the room, and Claudia had laughed, and yawned, and gone to bed.

Several men proposed to Claudia during the next two years, only to be rejected with a finality which left no ground for appeal, and then, soon after the celebration of her twenty-fifth birthday, John Biggs appeared upon the scene. He was neither a Maharajah nor a German Jew, and he knew nothing whatever about soap-boiling. Probably in early years he had hardly been better acquainted with soap itself! He was an Australian by birth; a man of the people, who by a series of lucky chances had first discovered a gold reef, and then secured it for his own. A born fighter, he had experienced a delight in every step on the road to success, which was strangely lacking when the summit was reached. He was a multi-millionaire; he owned more money than he could spend. The battle had been fought and won, and henceforth life stretched before him barren of interest. He made his way to London, as millionaires have a habit of doing, was eagerly welcomed by a certain section of society, and in the course of a few weeks met Miss Berrington at a musical "At Home."

"Who's the Ogre?" asked Claudia of her com-

panion as she watched the entrance of the big, lumbering man, who still carried his dress clothes with an air of discomfort. She shuddered daintily. "He looks like, 'The better to eat you, my dear.' Such teeth oughtn't to be *allowed! Has* he any eyes? They are so buried in fat that one can't see. It's very inconsiderate of Lady Rollo to give us such shocks! If he comes over here, I shall scream!"

"That's Biggs, the Australian millionaire, the third richest man in the world, so they say. He *is* an ugly beggar, and as glum as he's ugly. Doesn't appear to get much fun out of his pile! There's no need to be introduced to him, Miss Berrington, if you'd rather not. Shall we go and hide in the conservatory?"

The speaker was a recent acquaintance, sufficiently under the spell of Claudia's dimples to believe her everything that was disinterested and simple. Her reply gave him a shock.

"A millionaire, is he? That covers a multitude of—teeth! I shan't scream, after all. No; I don't want to hide. I've a penchant for millionaires! I'll sit here and look pretty! How long do you give him, Mr. Bruce, before he asks for an introduction?"

Mr. Bruce gave him ten minutes, but, as a

matter of fact, it was only seven and a half by the clock before the Ogre was bowing before the Beauty's sofa, and being smilingly welcomed to a seat by her side. He was portentously ugly! Claudia, regarding him with her long green eyes, thought she had never before beheld so unattractive a man. "Flabby dabby" was her not inappropriate mental definition, but the small grey eyes looking out of the vast mass of flesh were disconcertingly keen and alert. Claudia realized that her description did not apply to the man's *mind*, however aptly it might fit his body.

As for John Biggs, no words could describe his admiration of this wonderful new specimen of womanhood. Never in all his life had he beheld anyone so fair, so exquisite, so ethereal. Her hair was like threads of gold. The exquisite fineness and beauty of her complexion was like that of a child. It seemed a miracle in the eyes of the big, rough man that a grown-up woman should preserve such delicacy of charm. Yet as they exchanged the first commonplaces of conversation there was something in the expression of those sunken eyes which was not wholly approving. They seemed to Claudia like small steel gimlets, piercing into her soul! As he bade her good-bye that evening, John Biggs announced coolly:

"I shall see you again on Thursday, as arranged!" and when Claudia exclaimed, he waved aside her protests with a sarcastic laugh.

"You have been at pains to tell me exactly what you are to be doing every day of this week! Didn't you *intend* me to meet you?"

Claudia shrugged her shoulders, and took refuge in her usual honesty.

"Well—I *did!* But you might have pretended that I didn't. It's rather unkind to show that you see through my poor little machinations with such ease."

"I never pretend," said John Biggs. His eyes rested on the string of imitation pearls encircling the slender neck, and he spoke again, roughly, insolently: "Why do you deck yourself with sham beads?"

"Because I have nothing better, of course. What a stupid question to ask!"

"You ought to wear emeralds," he said. "They are the stones for you, with your complexion and eyes. You ought to wear emeralds. Ropes of emeralds."

"I intend to!" answered Claudia calmly.

Their eyes met, and they stared at one another; a cold and challenging stare.

During the next fortnight Society watched with

interest the progress of the affair between "Beauty and the Beast," and speculation was rife as to its outcome. Would he propose; and, if so, would she—*could* she accept? It seemed impossible to her friends that even Claudia, the mercenary, could sell herself to this ogrelike man. But Claudia herself had no hesitation.

On the fifteenth day after their introduction, the couple sat together under a tree at one of the outdoor functions of the year, and John Biggs asked a sudden question:

"What did you think of me," he asked, "when you first saw me that evening at the Rollos'?"

Claudia smiled at him with the sweetness of an angel.

"I thought," she said, "you were the ugliest man I had ever seen!"

"And yet," he said sneering, "you made eyes at me across the room. You willed me to come and be introduced!"

"Yes, I did. But that," said Claudia serenely, "was because you were rich."

The gimlet-like eyes stared long and straight at the lovely face, beneath the rose-crowned hat.

"I think," John Biggs said deliberately, "you are the most soulless human creature on earth!

That lovely body of yours is a shell—a beautiful shell with nothing inside. You have no soul!"

"I don't want one, thank you. They're such a bother. Why are you so cross with me all of a sudden?" cried Claudia, making a delightful little *moue* of childlike injury and distress. "I've been so nice to you all this time, and it's mean to ask questions, and then get cross when I tell you the truth."

"You are false!" he replied coldly. "Your honesty is a blind to hide the falseness beneath. There is nothing true, nor straight, nor honest about you." And then bending nearer, so that his huge brown face almost touched her own, he hissed a question into her ear: "Claudia—will you marry me?"

Claudia gave a trill of birdlike laughter.

"Yes, please!" she cried gaily. "But what a funny proposal! You don't 'lead up' a bit well. They are generally so flattering and nice, and you were horrible. Why do you want to marry me, if you disapprove of me so much?"

"Why do you want to marry *me?*" he asked in return. There was no lover-like ardour in his voice; the sunken eyes gleamed with a mocking light; every tooth in his head seemed to show as

he bent over her. "Is it because you love me, Claudia?"

"N-ot exactly," said Claudia, with a gulp. His nearness gave her a momentary feeling of suffocation, but she braced herself to bear it without shrinking. "N-ot exactly; but I love the things you can give me! It's a fair exchange, isn't it? You want a hostess; I want a home. You don't pretend to love me, either!"

Then suddenly his eyes blazed upon her.

"Not you, perhaps, but your beauty! I worship your beauty," he cried. "Your beauty has driven me mad! Make no mistake, my girl, you don't deceive me—you are not worth loving, not even worth buying, though you are so ready to sell your dainty pink and white self, but I am going to buy you all the same. I've worked hard for my money, and I can afford to indulge myself in worthless trifles if it suits my fancy. It is, as you say, a fair exchange. You want my money, I want your beauty. I have worked among grim sights; now, for a change, I shall look upon—You!" He stretched out his great hand, and laid it beside hers. "Hide and satin! Who would believe that we belonged to the same species! You're a dainty morsel, my dear. We shall make a pretty pair."

Claudia looked at him, and felt a shrinking of heart.

"You'll be good to me?" she asked him. "You'll promise not to quarrel, or be stingy? You won't make me marry you, and then put me on an allowance, or fuss about bills? You'll promise faithfully!"

"You shall have as much money as you can spend. You're an object *de luxe*, my dear, and shall be shielded carefully in your glass case. I'm not a fool to buy a curio, and not look after its preservation. Take care of your beauty! Deck it up! It's mine! I've bought it—*see that I get my price!*"

He lifted his hand and stroked the exquisite cheek. Seen close at hand, the fineness and smoothness of the skin was even more wonderful than from afar. He gripped the chin between finger and thumb, and turned her face to his, staring greedily at each curve and line. In appearance, as in manner, Claudia went in for honesty. There was no artificiality about her beauty, not even a brush of powder upon the skin. The man who had just settled his terms regarded his purchase with kindling eyes.

"I'll buy you your emeralds, my beauty, the finest emeralds I can find," he cried. "Everyone

shall talk of you; everyone shall envy you. The Queen of Beauty, Mrs. John Biggs!"

Claudia Biggs had been married for two years, and had flourished like the proverbial bay-tree. Her wedding had been one of the smartest functions of the season, her honeymoon had been spent in a lordly castle "lent for the occasion" by its titled owner. As Mrs. John Biggs, she had made her presentation curtsey to her sovereign in a gown whose magnificence was the talk of the town; every house that was worth visiting threw open its doors to the millionaire and his wife, and Society flocked to the entertainments given by them in their turn. There had been those who had prophesied disaster from the marriage, who had felt convinced that Claudia would not be able to endure so close a companionship with her Ogre, but as time passed on they were obliged to confess their mistake, for Claudia bloomed into an amazing, an almost incredible, beauty. She had always been lovely, but the loveliness of Claudia the maid was as nothing compared with that of Claudia the wife. What had been, as it were, a flower of the wayside, had become the most rare and costly of exotics, tended with every extravagance of care. The most ex-

quisite garments, the most costly gems, were showered upon her by a husband who took no account of money spent on the adornment of the beauty for which he had paid so high a price; but if he were generous in the fulfilment of his promise, he insisted that Claudia should do her own share. She must be sparing in food and drink, she must take regular exercise; she must keep early hours, and retire to the country for specified periods of rest. John commanded, and, after one memorable attempt at rebellion, Claudia had silently obeyed. She never voluntarily recalled that occasion, but from time to time it visited her in dreams, and then she awoke screaming, as from a nightmare.

At the end of two years, the girl friend who had lectured Claudia on the night of her confession that she wanted money came to pay a visit to the Mayfair mansion, afire with eagerness to see with her own eyes this strangely matched pair. Claudia was lazy about correspondence, and on the rare occasions when she did exert herself to write, her letters were stiff and artificial. She was aware of her own lack of epistolary skill, and was in the habit of referring her friends to the Society papers for news of her doings. "They'll tell you all about my dresses," she would say serenely, and following her advice her friends read accounts of wonderful

brocades emboidered with real jewels, of trains composed of cloth of gold, and cobweb creations of lace, whose value ran high in four figures, and they laughed to themselves as they read, recalling the old days and the rich cousin's "cast-offs."

Certainly Claudia could now claim to be one of the most gorgeously dressed women in society, but —was she happy? Meriel, who was of a romantic and sensitive temperament, recalled the appearance of John Biggs as he had appeared at the wedding ceremony: the gross bulk of the man, the projecting teeth, the small eyes glowing like points of light, the large coarse face; remembering, she shuddered at the remembrance, and for the hundreth time repeated the question—was it possible that Claudia could know happiness with such a mate?

Meriel arrived at the Mayfair mansion late one March afternoon, and was escorted up a magnificent staircase into an equally magnificent drawing-room on the first floor. Everything on which the eyes rested was costly and beautiful, but, looking around with dazzled eyes, Meriel realized that this was but a show-room, an enlarged curio case, in which were exhibited isolated objects of value. There was no harmony about the whole, no skilful blending of effect; the loving touch

which turns a house into a home was missing here. The perfect specimens stood stiffly in their places, there was no sign of occupation, not so much as a book lying upon a chair.

The first impression was undoubtedly disappointing, but presently the door opened, and Claudia herself appeared on the threshold, and ran forward, impulsive, loving, and unaffected as in the days of her obscurity.

"Meriel! Oh, Meriel! It *is* ripping to see you again, you dear, nice old thing! I'm ever so pleased you could come. I don't often have visitors. I'm bored with visitors, but I wanted you. And you look just the same; not a bit older. I always did say you had the sweetest eyes in the world—*and* the ugliest hats! Meriel darling, I shall take you at once to my milliner's."

"No good, my dear, I've no money to spend. Besides, what's the use of worrying about clothes while I'm with you? I'm bound to look the veriest frump in comparison, so why worry any more? We are not all the wives of millionaires."

"No! Isn't it a pity? I do wish you were. Sit down, dear, and we'll have tea."

Claudia touched the electric bell and seated herself on a sofa a little to the left of her friend's chair, looking towards her with a smile in

which complacency was tinged with a touch of anxiety.

"How do I look?"

Meriel looked, laughed, and waved her hands in the air with a gesture meant to convey the inadequacy of words.

"A vision! A dream. Snow white. Rose red. A fairy princess. A diamond queen. Quite unnecessarily and selfishly beautiful, my dear, and as sleek as a well-stroked cat! Really, Claudia, you've eclipsed yourself!"

"Oh, have I? You think so really? Honestly, you think so? Meriel, you *are* a dear; I do love you!" cried Claudia, and Meriel noticed with amazement that there was unfeigned relief in her voice. It was a new development for Claudia to show any uncertainty concerning her own charms!

Throughout the meal which followed Meriel was absorbed in admiration of the beautiful creature who sat beside her; her unaccustomed eyes dwelt with something like awe upon the costly intricacies of her attire, the limpid purity of the gems which glittered on the white hands. Claudia's clothing expressed the last word in smartness, but she had not been infected by the modern craze for powder and rouge. The beauty of her face and hair were due to nature alone, but, despite the

warmth of her friend's admiration, she herself seemed to feel some uncertainty as to their effect. From time to time she craned her head to study herself in a mirror which hung upon the wall, and at each glance her forehead wrinkled. Meriel pushed her chair slightly to the left so that she also might see that reflection, and discovered with amusement that the cause of this perturbation was a slight pink flush which rose above the lace collar, and touched the base of the cheek; she bit her lips to restrain a smile, realizing with increased amusement that ever since she had entered the room Claudia had skilfully manœuvred to hide this trifling disfigurement from observation. What a bore to be a society belle who was obliged to worry seriously about a trifle which would probably disappear in the course of a few hours!

The two friends were talking merrily together when the door opened, and John Biggs entered the room. He was slightly thinner, a thought more presentable than of yore, but the small eyes had lost none of their sunken gleam. Meriel had to keep a strong control over herself to hide her shuddering dislike as his hand touched hers, but she acknowledged that he was a gracious host, and that she had no cause to find fault with the manner in which he gave her welcome. The greetings over, she dis-

covered that Claudia had taken advantage of the breathing space to move her chair to the opposite side of the small tea-table, so that her husband from his arm-chair should see her to the best advantage, and the disfigurement of that slight rash should be inflicted upon the guest rather than upon himself. It struck Meriel as a pretty, almost a touching action, and she watched eagerly to discover if it were possible that the miracle of love had united this husband and wife.

First for the husband—his conversation was addressed as in duty bound mainly to his guest, but ever and anon his eyes returned to his wife, and dwelt upon her, fascinated, absorbed, as though of all the treasures which the room contained she was in his sight the most priceless of all. Then for the wife—a slight but very perceptible change had come over Claudia's manner since the moment of his entrance. Her affectation of candour disappeared, an air of caution and reserve enveloped her like a mist. She gave the altogether new impression of considering her words, of shaping them continually to please the ears of her audience. Yet she had shown her old outspokenness during the first few minutes of the interview, had for instance had no hesitation in condemning the ugliness of Meriel's hat. Obviously then it

was her husband whom she was considering, not her guest. Once more Meriel commended the attitude; once more hope raised her head. She addressed herself to her host in quite a cordial and friendly manner.

"I have been telling Claudia that she has eclipsed all her former records! She is looking younger, and more brilliant than I have ever seen her."

John Biggs looked at his wife, and his eyes gleamed. What did that gleam mean? Did it mean love, the love which a man might naturally be supposed to cherish for a wife so young and lovely?

It was Meriel's nature to believe in her fellow creatures, and she told herself that of course it meant love. What else could it be? It was imagination only which had read into that glance something cold and cruel, a triumph of possession more malignant than tender. When Claudia rose to escort her friend to her room, there came the first note of discord, for her husband rose too, and as she would have passed by stretched out one great hand to detain her, while with the other he held her chin, turning her face so that the pink rash was deliberately exposed to his gaze. A moment before it had been hardly noticeable, but

at that touch the pink flush faded from Claudia's cheek, leaving her so pallid that the disfigurement was increased by contrast.

"Still there, I notice!" he said shortly, and then with a certain brutality of emphasis: "Get rid of that!" he cried deeply. "Get rid of it. *And quickly.* Do you hear?"

"Yes, John," Claudia said, and there was a breathless catch in her voice, as though his words filled her with fear.

Meriel marvelled still more!

Later on that evening, Meriel repaired to her friend's room to indulge in one of those hair-brushing *tête-à-têtes* dear to the feminine soul.

"Well, Claudia," she began, a touch of something approaching envy sounding in her voice, "you at least have gained what you wished for! You plumped for money, and you have more than you can spend. Do you find the experience as satisfactory as you expected?"

Claudia smiled, and leaned back luxuriously against her cushions.

"Oh, *quite!*" she cried emphatically. "After two years' experience, I am still of the opinion that it is the only thing that matters. It's wonderful what money can do, Meriel; it's magical! Good

people talk of greater gifts that you may get if you are good and self-denying, and have a dull time, but they are all in the clouds, and money is so delightfully, so tangibly real!" She glanced round the beautiful room, then down to the little ringed hand stretched out to the fire; she moved her fingers to and fro, so that the flames might wake the sparkle of gems, and heaved a sigh of luxurious content. "I used to long for things that I could not have; now I never need to long, for they are mine as soon as I think of them! How can one help being happy, when one has everything one wants?"

"There are some things that money cannot buy." Once more Meriel could not resist echoing the truism of centuries, but Claudia shook her head with laughing contradiction.

"Rubbish! Don't you believe it! Anyway, money can buy such good imitations that you can't tell them from real! It can do more than that. It—" She paused, with a sudden intake of breath, and her voice sank to a deeper note: "*It can cover things up!*"

Meriel's eyes shot a curious glance. Through the evening she had studied the husband and wife with a puzzled scrutiny, and now, at the end of it, she felt as far as ever from solving the mystery

which she sensed as lying beneath the surface. Claudia's manner to her husband was gay and charming, but in the midst of her lightest badinage the friend of her youth had discerned an effort, a strain, an almost painful endeavour to win his approval.

And he? Nothing could be more marked than the man's care for his beautiful wife. Why was it that through all his elaborate attentions there lurked a cold, a sinister effect?

"But what can you have that you wish to cover, Claudia?" Meriel inquired. "By your own confession, you have only to wish and it is yours, and you have a devoted husband who looks after you as if you were the most fragile of hothouse flowers. It's absurd, you know, for you were always as strong as a horse! That transparent look of yours is a delusion; but how upset he seemed, poor man, because your cheek was just a little inflamed to-night."

Claudia straightened herself; an involuntary shiver shook her slight form. Her voice had a nervous ring:

"It's nothing—it's nothing!" she cried. "Just spring, and these horrid east winds. But it won't go! I've tried a dozen things; and he hates it—he hates any fuss or illness! I must never be ill, or

have anything that spoils. There's this ball coming on next week, and I am to be the Ice Queen. I *must* get my face better before then! I've got the most wonderful dress. He planned it for me. He is determined there shall be nothing to touch it in the room. Goodness knows the amount he has spent upon it! I simply daren't look anything but my best!"

"My dear Claudia!" Meriel's voice was full of protest. "What nonsense you talk! You are very beautiful, my dear, but you can't expect an eternal perfection! You must have your ups and downs like other people, and grow old in your turn, and lose your hair and complexion, and grow withered and toothless!"

Claudia leaped to her feet with a gesture which was almost fierce in its intensity.

"Be quiet!" she cried. "Be quiet! Don't dare to speak of it. I'm young still; not twenty-seven. I've ages and ages ahead before I need think of growing old. And women don't lose their beauty nowadays. They know how to keep it. They *have* to keep it! And I—I more than anyone!"

She crossed the room to her dressing-table, and, switching on an extra electric light, bent low to examine her face in the glass.

"It's only a slight rash, Meriel; *but it won't go!* I—I don't know what to do about it. I'm worried to death. Do help me. Do advise. Do tell me what to do."

It was the first time that Claudia's friend had ever heard her appeal for help, and there was a thrill in her voice which could not be denied.

"My dear girl," she said quickly, "I'm no good at cosmetics. My complexion has to take its chance, and nobody cares whether it's good or bad. But if you are specially anxious to look your best at this ball, why waste time in experiments? A few guineas more or less is nothing to you. Go to-morrow to consult the first skin specialist in London."

Claudia looked at her, a long, thoughtful look. She began to speak and checked herself, subduing as it were a hidden fear. Then she nodded slowly, once and again.

"I will!" she said firmly. "I will. It's folly putting it off. I'll telephone at once, and make an appointment."

The examination was over. A longer and more exhaustive examination than seemed necessary for so slight a cause. The specialist stood hesitating, his face puckered in thought.

Claudia smiled at him with her most dazzling smile.

"You think you can make me quite better for the ball?"

He looked at her swiftly, and as swiftly looked away.

"That is a very short time. I am afraid I can hardly promise that."

"How soon can you make me better?"

"These skin troubles are sometimes lengthy affairs. It will be necessary for you to have a course of treatment. I should like to see Mr.—er —your husband, and talk the matter over with him."

But at that Claudia swept forward with a commanding air.

"It is impossible! I forbid it! He does not know that I am here to-day. He must not know! If there is anything to be done, I must do it without his knowledge! I cannot tell him. I dare not tell him: What is it that is wrong with my face? It is only a little rash. *Why do you look at me like that?* For God's sake say that it won't take long, that it won't get worse; that I shall be able to—*to hide* it from him; to keep my beauty! *What is the matter?* Why don't you speak? You must tell me. I *must* know! Whatever it is I *must* bear

it alone! I daren't tell him—he must never know!"

The great doctor turned away his face. His lips moved, once and again, before at last the dread word echoed through the room:

"*Lupus!*"

III

THE GIRL WHO WISHED FOR ADVENTURE

THE girl who had wished for adventure journeyed back to her native village two days after the New Year's party, and spent the following eighteen months in tramping monotonously along a well-worn rut. The only difference made by that oft-remembered conference was in her point of view. Before that date she had sighed for the unattainable; after it, the unattainable became the possible. Some day, if she but waited, opportunity would come; some day the end of a thread would float downward towards her hand, and grasping it, she would be led into a new world! To the best of her power, she cultivated this attitude, and each monotonous month, as it dragged past, added strength to her determination to snatch the first opportunity that came her way.

At the end of eighteen months the girl packed up her trunk, and left home to pay a dull visit to a great-aunt.

"Don't expect me to write letters," she said to her family at parting, and the family groaned in chorus, and cried: "Please, don't! It's quite enough for one of us to be victimized. Spare us the echoes of Aunt Eliza! Just send a postcard when you're coming back."

Great-aunt Eliza was a daunting old lady who prided herself upon speaking the truth.

"Goodness! How you have gone off," was the first remark which she hurled at her great-niece's head, after the conventional greetings had been exchanged. She poured out a cup of strong, stewed tea, and offered a slice of leathery muffin. "And you used to be quite nice looking!"

Juliet smiled with the laboured brightness of a wallflower in a ballroom, and said, but did not for a moment mean:

"I'm growing old, Aunt Eliza."

"You are, my dear," agreed Aunt Eliza. "Twenty-eight, is it, or twenty-nine? And three other girls at home. Pity you haven't married! Your father will have precious little to leave."

Juliet, who was twenty-six, and had never had a real definite proposal, smiled more laboriously than before, but the muffin tasted bitter as gall.

On the third day of the visit, Aunt Eliza read a letter at the breakfast-table, and said suavely:

"I shall have to curtail your visit, my dear! Cousin Maria Phillips writes that she is in the neighbourhood, and wishes to come over to see me. I can't refuse to receive Maria, but two guests would upset the servants. You must come again later on. Perhaps there are some other friends you would like to visit?"

Juliet replied haughtily that there were many other friends. When would Aunt Eliza wish——

"Oh, there's no hurry. Perhaps to-morrow," said the old lady calmly. "This afternoon, my dear, I want you to go to the hospital for me. I distribute flowers in the Mary Wright Ward every Thursday, but I have a slight cold to-day, and daren't venture out. Be ready by three, and the brougham will take you there. You can walk home."

At half-past three o'clock, therefore, Juliet entered the long bare stretch of the Mary Wright Ward, dedicated to female surgical cases, and passed from bed to bed, distributing little bunches of drooping flowers affixed to little white cards inscribed with texts. The patients accorded but a lukewarm welcome to these offerings, but were unaffectedly pleased to welcome the handsome girl whose coming made a break in the monotonous day. Some of the patients were sitting upright

against their pillows, progressed so far towards convalescence as to be able to enjoy a chat; others could only give a wan smile of acknowledgment; at the extreme end of the ward the sight of a screened-off bed told its own sad tale.

The woman in the nearest occupied bed related the story in a stage aside.

"Accident case, brought in this morning. Dying, they think! Run over by a motor in the street. And only a bit of a girl like yourself! Mumbles a bit at times, delirious-like—nothing you can understand. There! she's beginning again!"

The sound of the thin, strained voice sent a shiver down Juliet's spine, for there was in it a note which even her unaccustomed ears recognized. She turned to depart, with the natural shrinking of the young and healthy, but her haste made her careless, and the remaining bunches of flowers tilted out of her basket and rolled along the polished floor. Those that had fallen the farthest were almost touching the screen, and as Juliet bent to pick them up the mumbled voice seemed suddenly to grow into distinctness.

It was a number that the voice was mumbling; number whispered over and over.

Eighty-one! . . . Eighty-one! . . . Gros-

venor. Are you there? . . . Eighty-one, are—you—there?"

The mumbling died away, rose again, was lost in groans. Despite the weakness and the haste, the listener realized a quality in the voice which differentiated it from those of the other occupants of the ward. It was the voice of a woman of education and refinement, a woman belonging to her own class.

Juliet shivered, and, clutching her flowers, walked quickly down the ward. Half-way down its length she met the Sister, and put a tentative question, to which was vouchsafed a cool, professional reply:

"Yes. Very sad! Internal injuries. Sinking rapidly. Evidently a girl in good circumstances."

"Do you know her name—anything about her?"

The Sister shrugged slightly.

"Her clothes are marked 'Alice White,' and she had some American addresses and steamship tickets in her purse. The *Lusitania* landed her passengers this morning. She has said nothing coherent, and, of course, cannot be questioned. The matron is making inquiries——"

At that moment the quiet of the ward was broken by a sound of a cry of terrible import.

Juliet quailed before it, and the Sister, darting forward, disappeared behind the screen.

Alas for Alice White, who but a few hours ago had been young and strong, and heedless of disaster! Juliet descended the staircase of the hospital thrilling with horror at the remembrance of that cry, her mind seething with agitated questions. Who was Alice, and who—a thrill of excitement ran through her veins—who was Eighty-one, Grosvenor, with whom the dying girl's thoughts had sought communion?

Grosvenor? That meant London. Alice White, then, had friends in London. Would it not be better to communicate with them, rather than with mere officials in an office?

At the door of the great building, Juliet hesitated and turned from the street as if to retrace her steps. Should she go back to the Mary Wright Ward, tell the Sister what she had overheard, and suggest telephoning forthwith? For a moment the suggestion found favour, then, with her foot outstretched to remount the first step, she drew back and walked rapidly away. In the flash of a moment it had darted into her brain as a crystallized resolution to give her information into no second hand, but to go herself to the nearest call office and ring up Eighty-one Grosvenor. The woman

in the nearest bed had spoken of mutterings. The sister had caught no coherent words. If death had immediately followed her own interview, it seemed probable that no one but herself had overheard the number.

Juliet's eyes brightened, and a flush of colour showed in her cheeks. The information received might be of the driest; the sequel of reporting it to the hospital authorities promised but small excitement; nevertheless, in her uneventful life, small things counted as great, and the touch of uncertainty fired her blood.

She seated herself in the little boxed-off room, and at the end of ten minutes' wait received an affirmative answer to the oft-repeated question.

"Yes. This is Eighty-one, Grosvenor. Who is speaking?"

Though she had waited so long, Juliet was still pondering how to word her inquiries. It seemed useless to mention an unknown name, so on the impulse of the moment she decided to give a simple account of the accident.

"Alice White—" She was about to add—"has been mortally injured," or some such statement, when, cutting swiftly across her words, came a cry of relief from the other end of the wire:

"Alice White! *At last!* We've been expect-

ing to hear from you all day. It's urgent. Why didn't you wire?"

"I—I—" Juliet stammered in confusion, and the voice, a woman's voice, interrupted again, in a sharp, businesslike accent:

"Never mind now. You can explain later. Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"That's right! Then listen to me, and give your answers in monosyllables. I will spell any names you miss, if you ask me to repeat. Don't attempt to pronounce them yourself, but write them down in a note-book. There must be no mistake. Are you ready?"

"One moment." Juliet had no note-book, but a search in her bag found a pencil and the blank page of a letter. "Ready!"

"You are ready to write instructions? I have been keeping over a case until your arrival, as it seemed in your line. It is urgent. Nice people. Comfortable surroundings. You would stay in the house as a guest. Can you go on first thing to-morrow?"

For one second, barely a second, Juliet hesitated; then the answer came, short and sharp:

"I can!"

"That's good! Go to the station to-day, and

look up your route. There will be several changes. Have you your pencil? Write down 'Maplestone —Antony Maplestone.' Have you got it? 'The Low House.' L-o-w. 'Nunkton.' N-u-n-k-t-o-n. 'Great Morley.' 'Maplestone, The Low House, Nunkton, Great Morley.' Have you got that? Go on to-morrow by the first train. I will wire to Mr. Maplestone to expect you. He will explain the case. Are you all right for money? Take your best clothes, as for a country visit. Report to me in the course of a week. Do your best. Good chance for you. (Yes, I've nearly finished. I've not had my three minutes.) You understand, Miss White? You quite understand?"

"I quite understand," said Juliet, and sat down heavily on the chair beside the receiver.

How had it happened? How much was she to blame? From the moment of that first interruption it seemed as if she had had no chance to explain. Without any preconceived intention of taking the injured girl's place, she had done so, as it were, without volition of her own. The spirit of adventure, so long nourished, had grasped at the opportunity, before the slower brain had had time to decide on its action.

Juliet drew a deep breath, and stared with dilated eyes at the opposite wall. "How *could*

I?" she asked herself, breathlessly. "How *dared* I? How *can* I?" And then, with a bursting laugh, "*But I will!*" she cried, and leaped nimbly to her feet.

"Urgent! Nice people! Good chance! A guest in the house!" Her lips moved in repetition of the different phrases as she walked rapidly back in the direction of the hospital. She knitted her brows in the effort to understand, to reconcile contradictions. What was this Alice White, and on what mission had she crossed the ocean? And who was Eighty-one, Grosvenor, who issued orders as to a subordinate, and gave instructions as to reports?

Only one thing seemed certain, and that was that it would be many a long day, if ever, before poor Alice White was fit to take up any work, however interesting. Remembering that last choking cry, it seemed probable that even now— Juliet resolutely stifled further questionings until once more she stood within the portals of the hospital, and made her inquiries of the porter. He retired, and returned, after a few minutes' absence, with a face appropriately lengthened.

"Gone, miss! Directly you left. Went off in a moment."

Juliet nodded, and turned back to the street.

What exactly had she intended to do had Alice White still been alive? Honestly, she did not know! It seemed as though she would never be able to answer that question. She waved it impatiently aside. Why trouble about might-have-beens? The girl was dead! The only question of importance which now remained was, *what was she herself going to do?*

Juliet thought of the long years of boredom and waiting which had made up her life; she thought of her dull, comfortable home; of her dull, comfortable visits, and longingly, daringly, she thought of the interesting "case" which was "urgent," and a "good chance." She recalled with a tingling of excitement her aunt's morning announcement, which necessitated her own departure on the morrow.

"I could go over to Nunkton, and see what it meant. If there was anything I didn't like I could move on at once to the Blakes. No one need know; no one need guess. Even if I stayed for a few days, it could be arranged!" She stopped short in the middle of the pavement, and drew a deep breath of excitement.

"It's my chance!" she cried to herself. "The chance I've been waiting for! Whatever happens, whatever comes of it—*I shall go!*"

The next day Juliet set forth on her voyage of adventure, with the mingling of elation and nervousness inevitable under the circumstances. Remindful of telephone instructions, she attired herself with especial care, and was agreeably conscious that she looked her best. A travelling costume as smart as it was simple, a trig little hat, with just one dash of colour at the side to give the needed *cachet* and emphasize the tints of the face beneath. "Really quite a creditable face!" she told herself, smiling back at a reflection of grey eyes thickly fringed with black lashes, curling, humorous lips, and the prettiest flush of pink—genuine, washable pink—upon the cheeks. "If I were happy, if I were interested, I might be almost—beautiful," she told herself with a sigh. "Every woman grows plain when she is superfluous and alone."

Seated in the train, drawing near to her destination, Juliet found herself repeating the words over and over, like a child rehearsing a lesson. "Alice White," cried the mental voice, "Alice White," and again, "Alice White. It's my name! I must answer to it. I must give it when asked. I am Alice White, professional *something*—I don't know what. I am obeying a telephone summons meant for someone else, and, if I don't want to be discovered

within five minutes of my arrival, I must keep my wits about me, and think seventeen times at least before I utter a word. I'm to be met at the station and treated as one of the family, and to remember that appearance is a strong point, and wear my best clothes. . . ." She knitted her brows, and for the hundredth time endeavoured to reach a solution of the mystery. "I can't be a sick-nurse; the clothes settle that. If it had been that, I should have had to confess at once. But in other capacities I'm intelligent, I'm experienced, I'm willing. I'm *more* than willing—I'm *eager!* There's no reason why I should not do as well as the real Alice. After all, it's quite a usual thing to take up work under a professional name. Writers do it, artists, actors; there can be no harm in using the poor girl's name, if I do my best with her work."

The train drew up at the station, a small, flowery country station, and, opening the door, Juliet stepped lightly to the ground. Her carriage had been at the end of the train, and the length of platform stretched before her. A glance showed a solitary porter approaching the luggage van; one commanding figure of an unusually big man, in a tweed knickerbocker suit; and, farther off still, by the door of the booking-office, two ladies in

navy-blue costumes, apparently awaiting the arrival of friends. At the extreme end of the train another door opened, and an elderly man carrying a bag made a heavy descent to the platform. The ladies stood motionless; the man in tweeds hurried towards where Juliet stood. She looked at him anxiously, met the glance of a pair of level brown eyes, and was instantly conscious of two things concerning his state of mind. He was embarrassed; he was also agreeably relieved. The next moment he was facing her, and was holding out his hand.

"Miss White?"

"Yes."

"I am Antony Maplestone."

"Oh!"

Juliet was conscious that her own sensations exactly duplicated those of her companion. She was embarrassed; she was also agreeably relieved, for if adventure were to be her portion, no girl could have wished for a more attractive stage manager to initiate her into her part. She stood blushing and smiling, wondering what to say next, subconsciously aware the while that, by placing his tall form between her and the end of the platform, Maplestone was designedly screening her from the scrutiny of the blue-robed dames.

"I have a dog-cart waiting," he said hastily.

"I'm going to drive you home, and explain things *en route;* my man will look after your boxes. Er—there's just one thing—" The air of embarrassment grew more marked; a flush showed in his cheeks. "It's a nuisance; there are two women over there—neighbours; I'm afraid I'll be obliged to introduce you. Do you think, for a few minutes, until we can escape, you could manage to look a little—*intimate?*" His voice, his look, were so full of apology at the suggestion, that Juliet's surprise gave way to amusement. She laughed, a bright girlish laugh, and said, "Certainly!" in crisp, matter-of-fact tones which were evidently a vast relief to her companion. He stepped quickly to one side, as if anxious that her smiling face should be seen by others besides himself, and led the way down the platform, inclining his head towards her with an air of deepest solicitude.

"You have had a comfortable journey?"

"Oh, yes," Juliet nodded gaily, responding readily to his cue. He wished her to talk, he wished the watching women to believe that this was no first meeting, but a reunion of friends. For some unknown reason it was necessary to his interests that they should receive this impression. Very well, then, it should be done. "Alice White" was not going to fail in the first call upon her.

SOCIETY

"Oh, yes, quite comfy. I had a tea basket. *China* tea. Did you know you could get *China* tea in baskets? And a ducky little pot of jam, all to myself. Isn't this station pretty? Such sweet flowers!"

They were close to the ticket office by this time. The man's eyes flashed a look of gratitude and appreciation. He laid a light touch on her arm, and brought her to a stand before the waiting women.

"Here she is! I'm not disappointed, you see. I want to introduce you to each other while I have a chance. Miss Clare Lawson, Lady Lorrima, Miss Bridges."

Juliet bowed and smiled, her senses momentarily stunned by the responsibility of yet another cognomen. Now she would have to begin all over again and train herself to be "Clare."

The eyes of the two women were keenly critical; their words were cordial, if somewhat mysterious.

"*So* pleased to meet you! Quite an honour to be the first to welcome you. The Squire *will* be delighted!"

"I shall be delighted to see him," Juliet declared smiling. She disliked the attitude of these women as much as she was attracted by that of the man by her side. Despite their assurances, she had a

conviction that they were *not* pleased at her arrival; that it was a disappointment to them to find her appearance beyond criticism. The big man stood silent by her side; she divined also that he was nervous and troubled, momentarily dreading a slip on her part. She was determined to make no slip. Already she had ranked herself on his side, and felt the stirring of the true actor's joy in making the best of his part.

The younger of the two women gave a difficult, unmirthful laugh. She was a thin, elegant-looking creature, rather over thirty, whose good looks were marred by an expression of discontent.

"Really, you know," she cried in affected tones, "we were beginning to think that your name was Harris, and that Antony had invented you for his own convenience. It seemed so strange that he had never spoken of you before."

Juliet's little laugh of response was quite sweet and unruffled. "Oh, I'm very real, I assure you. A most substantial person. I'm so glad he didn't bore you with descriptions; they lead to so much disappointment." She held out her hand with a charming assurance. "*Good*-bye! Perhaps we may meet again."

The next moment they were passing through the office, out of view of the curious eyes, and a low-

toned "Bravo!" acclaimed the success of her effort. Juliet laughed in involuntary self-congratulation, and Maplestone laughed in sympathy. The two women, catching a sight of the dog-cart as it wheeled down the lane, saw the two laughing faces turned towards each other in mutual enjoyment, and the sight was not good in their eyes.

"It's true, then; an absolute fact. And quite presentable, too. Well, Honoria, I'm sorry!"

Meanwhile Juliet was putting her first question to her companion.

"Please—why am I Clare Lawson?"

His face fell. Amusement gave place to embarrassment. "Do you object? I'm sorry to have sprung it upon you so suddenly, but—well, you had to have some name, hadn't you? I suppose one is as good as another."

"Perhaps so, but it's just a trifle confusing, because—" Juliet drew herself up on the verge of an incriminating confession. "As you say, it doesn't really matter, but I am naturally interested. Who *is* Clare Lawson?"

"Er—as a matter of fact, there is no such person. I invented a fictitious girl, then, suddenly, was called upon for her name, so had to christen her on the spur of the moment. Clare happened to be the name of the heroine in a novel I'd just

finished reading, and Lawson was the first surname which came to my mind. It's not such a *bad* name, is it?"

Juliet made an expressive little grimace.

"Considered as an artistic effort, I can't say much for it. You might have done so much better. Clare! I'm not a bit like a Clare. And who is Clare *supposed* to be?"

He looked at her with a keen, comprehensive glance. Juliet had an impression that what he saw increased his embarrassment, from the very reason of his admiration. What he had to say would evidently have been easier if she had been less attractive, had not so obviously belonged to his own class. The flush mounted once more to his cheeks.

"Miss Lawson, I should like to begin with a word of self-defence. I have the reputation of being straight in my dealings and I think I may say that it is deserved, yet at this moment, owing to an—impulse, to—er—the folly of a moment, I find myself stranded, implicated—how shall I express it? I'm in the dickens of a hole, anyway, and for the moment can't imagine how I am ever to get out."

"And if you only knew it, *so am I!*" was Juliet's mental reflection. Aloud, she said sententiously,

"Such things *do* happen. I've heard of them. Please tell me about it. Perhaps I can help."

"That's ripping of you! You see, obviously, there *had* to be a girl, and, obviously also, I couldn't ask a friend. There was nothing for it but to get someone from outside. I searched the newspapers and spotted your office. They said they employed ladies, and being trained to detec— to inquiry work, I thought it would come easy to act a part."

In after years Juliet never quite understood how she retained her balance at that moment, and did not topple sideways, fall out of the high cart, and find a solution of her troubles. The sudden realization that she was masquerading as nothing more or less than a lady detective, was so stunning in its unexpectedness and chagrin, that even the tactful softening of the term to that of inquiry agent failed to restore her equanimity. Now, indeed, there was nothing before her but confession, for her whole nature revolted from the position of a "spy" in the household. It required a strong effort to speak in a natural voice.

"Wouldn't it be better if you began at the beginning and told me the whole story?"

"That's what I am trying to do, but it's so difficult. . . . The Squire, Mr. Maplestone, is

my uncle. He and his wife have been like parents to me. I am in the army—Indian regiment—home on a year's leave. They have no children, and I am their heir. Naturally, under the circumstances, they are anxious that I should—er——"

"Marry!"

"Quite so. Well!" in a tone of aggrieved self-vindication, "I *mean* to marry. Every fellow does when he gets past thirty. I came home this time with the determination to get engaged at the first opportunity, but—er—the time has passed by, and—it hasn't come off. I've met lots of girls, charming girls. I can't honestly say that I haven't had the *opportunity*, but when it came to the point"—he shrugged again—"I simply didn't want them, and that was the end of the matter. The dickens of it is, my leave is up in two months from now, and the old man is at the end of his patience. Last week he had an attack of gout, a bad one too, and that brought matters to a crisis. He declared he'd cut me off there and then if I did not get engaged at once. I was sorry for the old fellow; he was in horrible pain; the doctor said he must be soothed at all costs, so—er—er—on the spur of the moment I invented Clare. I said I was engaged to Clare, but that Clare was

afraid of the Indian climate, and refused to marry me till the regiment returned home, two years from now. I hardly realized what I was saying. I was between the devil and the deep sea. But he swallowed it whole, went off to sleep, and woke up as bright as a button. I was inclined to congratulate myself on having done a clever thing, for as I told you, I *intend* to marry. I am only waiting for the right girl to turn up. I may very likely meet her on the voyage out. Many men do. But, retribution fell upon me. He demanded to see Clare. I prevaricated. He grew suspicious. There was another scene, another relapse; it was a case of confessing all, at goodness knows what risk, or of finding Clare, and producing her for inspection. So—you see——"

Juliet sat silent; petrified, aflame. While he had been speaking, Maplestone had kept his eyes rigorously averted from her face; he continued to do so now, and they drove along the quiet lane in a silence which could be *felt*—a throbbing, palpitating, scorching silence, which grew momentarily more unendurable. Juliet told herself fiercely that she was a fool to feel embarrassed. Alice White would not have been embarrassed. Alice White would have accepted the position as a pure matter of business. As Alice White's substitute,

she must pull herself together and discuss the matter in a cool, rational fashion. If only her cheeks were not quite so hot!

"It's—er—rather an unusual proposition, isn't it? It is, as you say, somewhat difficult to discuss. Suppose," she cried desperately, "we treat it with a sense of humour! *Don't* let us be serious. Let us laugh over it, and then it will become quite easy."

"Oh, thank you, yes. How ripping of you!" His eyes flashed relief. "I can promise you that it won't be nearly as trying as it sounds. The old people will be all that is kind, and—er—you understand that he is an invalid, and his wife is his nurse. They are engrossed with their own affairs, and won't worry you with questions. It is only in your supposed connection with me that you will—er—enter into their lives. As to myself, I have the reputation of being reserved to a fault. They won't expect me to—er—er——"

Juliet forced a determined smile. "Precisely so! We'll be a model of all that an engaged couple—ought to be. But I had better not make myself too agreeable, in case the subsequent breaking off should prejudice the old people against you. I conclude *I* am to break if off?"

"Yes, please, if you don't mind—when I meet

the real girl. But please do me credit *pro tem.* The great thing is to demonstrate to the old man that I seriously think of marriage, and those two years give plenty of time. You understand that you have an insuperable objection to the Indian climate?"

"Certainly; that's easy. I've always longed to go, so I shall just turn my arguments upside down. And—er—where did we meet?"

"Oh, yes, of course, we must have some mutual coaching. There's not much time now, but after tea they'll expect us to have a *tête-à-tête;* we'll go over it then. I was introduced to you at Henley. You're the sister of Phil Lawson, an old school friend. It—er—it was a case at first sight. We got engaged on the third day."

"Most unwise!" said Juliet primly, and they laughed together with the heartiness born of relief from a painful situation. Really, this sense-of-humour attitude was an admirable solution.

Antony slackened the reins and, fumbling in a pocket, drew out a small box.

"May I—just for the next few days—beg your acceptance of this bauble?"

"Oh, thank you." Juliet drew off her gloves and held up a well-shaped hand, on the third finger of which sparkled a row of diamonds. "It's not

necessary. I can put this one on my left hand. It has quite an engagementy look about it, and I'd rather——"

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid it won't do. This is a family heirloom. The old man would consider it a slight if it were not used. Just for one week."

He opened the box, and showed a great square-cut emerald set in a border of diamonds—an antique jewel, evidently of considerable value—lifted it between finger and thumb, and held it out with calm expectancy. Quite calmly also, Juliet extended her left hand; but at the mutual touch, it was impossible to resist a thrill of embarrassment, a lightning realization of what the moment might have meant had the action been real instead of masquerade. Juliet hastily drew on her gloves; Antony became engrossed in driving. They drove in silence up a long drive, and saw before them an old stone mansion, covered with clustering ivy.

The butler stared, the footman stared. Raising her eyes as she passed under the great well of the staircase, Juliet caught the flash of a white cap hurriedly withdrawn. A baize door, obviously leading into the servants' quarters, creaked eloquently upon its hinges. The back of Antony's neck grew ever redder and redder as he led the way

onwards; finally the drawing-room door was flung open, and across a space of chintz, and tapestry, and massed-up roses, Juliet beheld two figures rise hurriedly in welcome.

The aunt's thin locks were parted in the middle, and surmounted by a lace cap with a lavender bow. She wore a douce black silk dress, with a douce lace collar. She looked Victorian, and downtrodden, and meek, and Juliet dismissed her in half a dozen words.

"She'll swallow anything!"

The Squire had a short neck, a red face, steel blue eyes, and a white waistcoat. He stood about five feet four in his boots and bore himself with the air of a giant.

"He'll swallow *nothing!*" was Juliet's second diagnosis, and she braced herself for the fray. The introduction was simple in the extreme.

"This is Clare!" said Antony, whereupon Mrs. Maplestone said hurriedly: "How d'you do. So pleased! You must have tea!" and the Squire said nothing at all, but cleared his throat, and pulled forward a chair. Then they all sat down, and Mrs. Maplestone busied herself over the tea-tray, while her husband took his turn to stare.

He began at Juliet's feet, and considered them judiciously. Large, but well shaped, wore a good

boot. Next he studied her hands, cocking a jealous eye at the emerald ring. Large again, but white; good fingers; manicured nails. Thirdly he considered her figure, and was pleased to approve. Fine girl, some flesh on her bones, none of your modern skeletons. Last of all he looked at her face. "Humph! not so bad. Points; distinctly points! Antony was not such a fool as he looked!" In five minutes' time the Squire could have passed an examination on the subject of Juliet's appearance, and she realized as much, and felt correspondingly elated when the hard eyes softened, and an offer of hot scones was prefaced by, "My dear." My dear had been examined and found correct. My dear was approved. By the time that cups were filled for the second time, the Squire had thawed to the point of jocularity.

"Well, Miss Clare, and what tales has this fine fellow been telling you about me? Wicked uncle, eh? Cruel ogre. Gouty old tartar, who insists upon having his own way, and bullies his unfortunate nephew till he is obliged to give in for the sake of peace? That's it, eh? That's what he told you."

Juliet looked across at Antony, discovered him flushed, frowning, supremely uncomfortable, and tilted her head with a charming audacity.

"Does that mean that he was bullied into having Me? It wouldn't be exactly 'peaceful' for him, if I believed that! He certainly would not dare to tell me anything so unflattering."

The Squire hastened to eat his words. The girl was a nice girl; frank, friendly, with a touch of the devil which was entirely to his taste. Not for the world would he prejudice her against the boy.

"No, no; not at all, not at all. Precious little notice he took of my wishes, until it suited himself to follow my advice. Obstinate fellow, you know; obstinate as a mule. Wouldn't think it to see him sitting there, looking as if he couldn't say bo to a goose; but it's a fact. You'll find it out another day!"

"I like a man to have a strong will," Juliet said with the air of a meek, gentle, little fiancée, and the Squire laughed loudly, and made a characteristic change of front.

"Glad to hear it! Glad you don't go in for any of this fashionable nonsense about independence and equality. You obey your husband, my dear, and stay quietly in your home, and content yourself with your house duties, as your mother did before you. What has *she* got to say about this precious engagement?"

"Mother thinks of me. She is glad of anything

that makes me happy," Juliet said, and flattered herself that she had rounded the corner rather neatly. Antony looked at her quickly, and as quickly looked away. Little Mrs. Maplestone gave a soft murmur of approval.

"She must be, dear! I am sure she must be and I'm sure she'll like Antony when she knows him better. I hope we shall soon meet your parents. It was through your brother that you met, was it not? An old school friend. At Henley?"

"Yes, Henley. Yes, Phil! Please don't ask me about it! The whole thing was such a rush. Only three days! It seems like a dream. I—I forget everything but the one great fact!" cried Juliet, taking refuge in truth, and thereby winning smiles of approval from her old-fashioned hearers, who considered such confusion suitable and becoming. They beamed upon her, and Juliet began to feel the dawnings of pride in her own diplomacy. She was getting on well; surprisingly well! She allowed herself to believe that Alice White could have done no better.

"Three days, eh?" repeated the Squire complacently. "Bowled him over in three days, did you, after being bullet-proof all these years! How in the world did you manage to do it?"

"I can't think!'" declared Juliet, truthfully

again, but she smiled as she spoke, and showed a dimple, and dropped her eyelids, so that the dark lashes rested on the pink of her cheeks, whereat the young man looked more embarrassed than ever, and the old one laughed till he choked, and offered her more cake, and called her "my dear" twice over in a single sentence, and delivered himself of the opinion that Antony was a lucky dog.

"Doesn't deserve it, after all his slackness and procrastination! Let's hope he'll appreciate his good luck. But what's this nonsense about waiting two years? What's this nonsense about not going back with him at once?"

Juliet looked as she felt, flustered, and taken aback.

"It's so—sudden!" she pleaded, and blushed as she said the word. "I—I don't approve of marrying in a rush. Only two months before he sails. Suppose he regretted it? S—suppose he changed his mind?"

"It's for him to answer that question! Speak up, Antony! Are you likely to change your mind? Do you feel any inclination to give up Miss Clare now that you have got her to promise to take you for better for worse?"

"I'm not given to changing my mind, sir,"

Antony said, discreetly answering the last question but one. He rose hastily as he spoke, evidently afraid lest his turn of cross-questioning was about to begin, and said hurriedly: "Clare is tired, Uncle. She'll answer all your questions later on. I'm going to take her into the garden for a little fresh air, and then send her upstairs to rest."

So for the next half-hour Antony Maplestone and Juliet, alias Alice, Clare, sat in a rose-shaded arbour, and discussed the plan of attack. There was so much to be settled. It was like making up a play, and coaching each other in the leading parts. Juliet was inclined to give herself airs on the success of her first scene, and discovered with surprise that her companion vouchsafed only a mitigated admiration.

"You must be very *used* to it!" he said grudgingly whereupon Juliet bridled, and declared:

"I'm not! It's the very first case I've had, when . . . All my experiences so far, have been strictly business-like. I think you might give me *some* encouragement. I thought I was so clever!"

"You were, you were! Uncommonly clever, and I felt all sorts of a fool. I'm not used to playing a part, and it comes harder than I expected. It's a comfort to escape and feel that we can talk

openly together!" He stretched his arms, and drew a big sigh of relief. Juliet sighed too, but not for the same reason.

"I think it might be a wise precaution," she said presently, "if I sent my parents abroad to travel for several months! Mrs. Maplestone spoke of wishing to see them, and it would be awkward to produce a suitable pair at a moment's notice. And dangerous! Think of the pitfalls that would yawn before us over reminiscences of childhood? Perhaps they'd better go for health! That would explain their leaving home just at this time. We must send them to a foreign spa for a six-weeks' course. Where shall they go?"

"Marienbad," Antony said promptly, whereon Juliet drew herself up haughtily, and put on an air of offence.

"No aspersions, if you please. *My* parents are thin! It shall be rheumatism, I think. That's quite ordinary and eminently respectable. They might *both* have it, if it comes to that."

But Antony objected.

"No. Not both! That's too drastic. My uncle would certainly object that you would inherit a tendency. Only your father! A recent attack. . . ."

"Just so; and they are anxious to take it in time.

Mother goes with him, as they are a devoted couple and couldn't endure to be parted for six weeks. Mud baths, I think. There's such a sound of verisimilitude about mud baths! I think we must really decide on mud baths."

"Poor beggar, yes! I'm afraid there's no help for him. Where are they, by the way? I've no idea. Have you?"

"Oh, yes. They are in Germany somewhere. Or is it Italy? Somewhere about that part of the world," Juliet said vaguely, whereupon Antony took out his pocket-book and wrote down a memorandum.

"A dutiful daughter ought to have her parents' address! I'll find that out before dinner. As a matter of fact, I don't think my uncle will trouble his head about your relations. There would have been the dickens to pay if he had not approved of you, but he was quite unusually amiable, took to you at first sight, and the aunt too. It went off far better than I expected."

"Just let me be quite clear on one point," Juliet demanded. "Am I nice, and amiable, and meek, or am I dashing and sportive?"

"Neither one nor the other, a useful blend. Don't worry about that. You are perfectly all right as you are."

"And—just as a guide for moments of expansion—*might* it be 'Tony'?"

"Tony it must be. Most decidedly Tony." His voice was brisk with decision. The brown eyes brightened in anticipation. "Perhaps even occasionally, 'Dear.'"

"Oh, no!" Juliet shook her head obstinately. "No 'dears'! I've been strictly brought up. I'm shy. *No* demonstrations in public. I've no brothers, you see, and have led a secluded life."

"Yes, yes, there's Phil; you must remember Phil. It was your brother Phil who introduced us at Henley. You were staying with friends."

"I *have* friends near Henley. Their name is Jones. Can you remember Jones? Mr. Jones, solicitor; Mrs. Jones; Miss Jones; Miss Florence Jones; Mr. Reginald Jones, son, junior partner."

"Just so. Reginald, of course, is Philip's friend. Phil is, like myself, home on leave. That simplifies things for you. By the by, he is in China, in the Customs."

"Poor dear Philip; with all these horrid riots. I *do* feel anxious about him!" sighed naughty Juliet in response; then, suddenly, "I wonder," she had cried soberly, "if I *ought!* I hate to deceive people, even for their own good. I wonder if I ought to go on."

"But surely"—he stared at her in amazement—"it's your *profession!* It would be impossible to do inquiry work if people knew from the beginning what you were about. Why did you—excuse me—choose such a profession if your conscience is so tender?"

"I—I didn't realize. It was arranged in a hurry. I don't think I shall take any more cases."

"No, don't!" Antony cried eagerly. "It's all right this time, for you have fallen among people who will treat you properly, but it might be so different. Haven't you a home where you can live safely and comfortably?"

"Very comfortably indeed, but I happen to be one of the horde of superfluous women who need something more than comfort."

Antony looked at her curiously at that, but he had asked no questions. Juliet was thankful for his silence; for the absence of obvious compliments. The situation would be intolerable with a man of another type. With Maplestone one had a comfortable feeling of security—a very comfortable feeling. Juliet fell asleep that night with a smile on her lips.

For three days all went well, the Squire approving, his wife motherly, Antony chivalrous and

attentive. Whatever the real experience might be, Juliet was satisfied that pretending to be engaged was an agreeable sensation. Morning and afternoon Antony drove her abroad, sat with her in the rose garden, or escorted her on long walks over the countryside, and soon, wonderfully soon, there was no further need of coaching between them, for the lives of each, and the experiences thereof, the hopes, aspirations, and rebuffs, had been spread as in an opened book before the eyes of the other, with just one reservation on Juliet's side, the disclosure of her own identity!

"I have had an adventurous life. The one thing I have not had to complain of is monotony," said Antony.

"And I have had nothing else. Until recently I have gone on, year after year, existing, not living, in the same little rut."

"No wonder you broke loose. A girl like you was never made for stagnation. You ought to travel: to see the world. I never met a woman with so keen an appreciation of beauty. Gad! how you would enjoy India, and the scenery we have over there. Last year we were stationed in the north, above Darjeeling. I'd like to blindfold you, and take you to a spot I know, and then take off the bandage, and show you—the

snows! That would be a moment worth living for."

"Ah, yes. Unfortunately, however, the climate of India is prejudicial to my health," Juliet reminded him primly.

"Oh, hang the climate of India!" cried Antony Maplestone.

The Squire also was inclined to "hang" the Indian climate in its bearing upon the health of his guest. He cross-questioned his prospective niece upon the subject with increasing irritability.

"What's the matter with your health? You look strong enough. Can't have a liver with that complexion. Can't have a heart, rushing about all day long. Given it away, eh, what? Antony, what's wrong with her heart?"

"Nothing, sir. It's a tip-top heart; in first-class working condition."

"What's wrong, then—what's wrong? Nothing but nerves and nonsense. If I were a young man and my fiancée didn't care enough about me to face a bit of discomfort, I'd—I'd comfort myself with the first nice girl that *would!* If you let him go off to India alone, young lady, you'll have yourself to thank if you are left in the lurch."

Juliet took out her handkerchief and pretended to cry. It was a comfort to be able to hide one's

face, and besides, just between herself and the handkerchief there *was* a tear. She *would* be left in the lurch, and, oh, my goodness, how dull it would be!

From the end of the room sounded three separate gasps of consternation.

"Leave her *alone*, uncle! It's my affair. Clare, *don't* cry!"

"He doesn't mean it, dear; he doesn't mean it. Antony never would."

"Kiss her, you stupid fellow, kiss her! What's the use of glowering there?"

Then, in the midst of a thrilling silence, Juliet felt strong arms enfold her, felt the sweep of a moustache against her cheek. It was the first, the very first time in the course of her twenty-six years that any man but a blood relation had offered her a caress, and—she liked the sensation! She felt a horrible, horrible inclination to abandon herself to that strong support; to lift her own lips to meet his. The rebound from the temptation gave energy to the gesture with which she pushed him away and leaped, flaming, to her feet.

"It's my own heart, and I know best what it can stand! And—and—there are snakes—and rats—and insects, crawly-creepy things dropping from the ceilings! He can have anyone he

likes. . . I don't care. . . I don't want him. I'll stay at home!" She dashed wildly from the room.

Antony and his aunt stared blankly at each other. The Squire chuckled complacently and rubbed his hands.

"*That's* all right," he cried cheerily. "That's done it. She'll go with you, my boy. She'll go all right. Book a second passage to-morrow, and I'll stand the risk."

At dinner that night there was an air of festival. The feast was sumptuous, the table was decorated with exquisite hothouse flowers, purely, spotlessly white—a bridal white, unmistakable in its significance. Juliet blushed as she beheld that table, and blushed again looking down on her own white robe. Upstairs in her own room she had cried, and stormed, and blushed, and trembled, and vowed fiercely to leave the house by the first train on the following morning, and sobbed again at the thought of departure. Also, she had vowed with fervour to be cold as ice to Antony Maplestone, and to prove to him by the haughtiness of her demeanour that his caress was unpardonable, without excuse. And then, being a woman, and a particularly feminine one at that, she had naturally selected her very

best dress, and had arrayed herself therein for his delectation.

Now what bad luck that the dress happened to be white!

The Squire over-ate himself recklessly. "Hang it all, my dear," he informed his protesting wife, "a man can't always be thinking of diet. There *are* occasions—" He nodded meaningly towards his guest, and quaffed a bumper of champagne.

After dinner, when the pseudo-lovers were left alone for the nightly *tête-à-tête*, the subject of the Squire's indiscretion was eagerly seized upon as a subject for conversation, to lessen the embarrassment from which both were suffering.

Said Antony, "It's madness. He has not yet recovered from the last attack. One would think that a man who has suffered such agonies would have learned wisdom!"

Said Juliet gloomily, "Who does? Nobody does! It certainly doesn't become *us* to—er—"

"Oh, well," he interrupted quickly, "let's hope he escapes this time. It's hard on a man to be everlastingly prudent. I'm not at all sure that the greatest wisdom does not exist in occasionally breaking loose!"

Juliet faced him, erect and dignified. She

had scented a personal application in his words, and was determined to stand no nonsense.

"Mr. Maplestone, I have been here four days; it seems to me inadvisable to stay any longer. To-morrow morning I propose to receive a telegram summoning me home. I should be obliged if you could make it convenient to be out after eleven o'clock. It would make it easier for me to get away."

There was consternation in his glance; more than consternation—dismay.

"Go! Why on earth should you go? Is it the office! Do they want you back at the office? Let *me* write. Surely if I write and say——"

"As a matter of fact there is *no* office. It's a mistake. I—I am not what I seem!" cried Juliet, with a touch of melodrama, born of desperation. Not another moment could she stand the deception; not another moment could she masquerade under another woman's name. "I am *not* an inquiry agent. Never was. Never will be. It was just—just——"

"Sit down. Sit down. Take your own time. Tell me all about it." Antony pushed a deep-cushioned chair towards her, seated himself near at hand, leaned forward, gazing into her eyes. There was no consternation on his face this time;

no dismay; nothing but happiest relief. "If you only knew how *thankful* I am! I hated the thought of such work for you. Now—tell me!"

And Juliet told him. Told him how, among a party of friends, she had avowed her yearning for adventure, and had been bidden to hold fast to the thought, and await an opportunity. All things, she was told, come in good time to those who wait. And she had waited; through long, monotonous, uneventful months she had waited, and waited in vain. And then, suddenly, a chance, an opening—a possibility which must be taken, or left, while a moment ticked away its course! She told of the dead girl whose place she had taken, honestly determining to do her best, and allow no one to suffer through the exchange.

"If it had been work of which I was incapable I should have left at once. You believe it, don't you? You *do* believe it?"

Antony seemed to ignore the question as beneath his notice. Something infinitely more important was occupying his mind.

"Then, what is your real name?"

"Juliet! All that I have told you of my people is true. Everything is true, but the name and the work. Perhaps, in time to come, you might explain to your uncle that Clare Lawson was just a

professional name which I adopted when I tried to take up work. It is quite usual. Many women do it."

"*Juliet!*" he repeated softly. From his manner he appeared to have heard only her name. "*Juliet!* It's perfect. A name that suits you above all others. Of course you are Juliet. I was a fool not to know that before. Juliet, I am so glad you are not Clare!"

"I'm not Clare, and I'm not Alice. It's a—a joke in two moves, but it is time it should come to an end. To-morrow I must go."

"You must not go. It's madness! Is it because of—of what happened to-day? It need never happen again. I was dreadfully sorry. I would not for the world——"

"Of course, of course. I *quite* understand. You were driven to it. It was as disagreeable to you as to me," Juliet said sourly. She *felt* sour; more ruffled by the explanation than she had been by the offence itself.

What would have happened next there is no saying, but at that moment the door opened, and Mrs. Maplestone appeared on the threshold. Uncle Godfrey was in pain. He wished to go to bed. Would Tony come and give him an arm?

Retribution sure and swift fell upon the Squire. All night long he tossed in pain, and in the early morn the doctor was summoned, who delivered himself of a gloomy verdict: Serious. One bad attack following hard on the top of another. The patient had been warned, and the patient had transgressed. The patient's heart was not in a condition to stand these repeated strains. The patient must have a nurse. Must be kept quiet. The patient must be safeguarded against irritation and strain. Excitement at this juncture might have serious effects.

Then the doctor drove away, and the patient, who was to be kept quiet, proceeded to work himself into a condition of fuss and antagonism against every separate member of the household, and in especial against Antony, his heir. It was Antony's fault that he was laid low; the contrariety of Antony which had ruined his health; and now he lay at death's door (he was at death's door; he *chose* to lie at death's door! It was his own business, he supposed, at whose door he should lie?); now, even at this last moment, Antony delayed, prevaricated, shilly-shallied, talked calmly of waiting a couple of years! It was not the girl's fault. The girl was willing enough. She was making a pretence of unwillingness. All girls

made a pretence. Let Antony stand up to her like a man, and she would give in; be glad to give in. Summon Antony! Summon the girl! Let them be brought before him. Let this matter be settled once for all!

Trembling, Mrs. Maplestone obeyed his orders. Trembling, Juliet obeyed, and stood beside the patient's bed. Antony was not trembling, but his cheek was pale. Crimson cheeked, bright of eye, the patient made his pronouncement: He had waited long enough; he could wait no longer; within the next few days he intended to die—probably to-morrow, or the day after; but before he died he wished to see his heir married to the woman of his choice. Send instantly for a priest!

"My dear uncle," Antony protested, "the thing's impossible. Even if—even if— There are preliminaries. Banns. Licences. It is a case of weeks; of *several* weeks——"

But the Squire knew better. There were such things as special licences. When money was no object, when life and death hung in the balance, mountains had been, mountains could again be, removed. With a shaking hand he beckoned Juliet to his side, and levied a shocking question:

"Girl, do you wish to kill me?"

"You don't understand, you don't understand!"

wailed the unhappy girl. "Dear Mr. Maplestone, try to be quiet; try not to worry about us. Only get better, and then—then——"

"I shall never get better," reiterated the Squire. His small bright eyes glittered with a sudden suspicion. "Is he playing with you? Playing fast and loose, to suit his own convenience? Has he been unkind to you, cold, disappointing? Are you tired already of the fellow?"

"Oh, no, oh, no, you *don't* understand! Dear Mr. Maplestone, do leave it until you are stronger."

The crimson of the Squire's cheeks turned to a deeper hue, a spasm of pain contorted his lips, his eyes rolled, closed, opened again, and turned with a dreadful intensity upon his nephew.

"I'm dying!" he cried. "You are killing me between you. *Antony!*"

Then Antony stepped forward and took Juliet by the hands. White to the lips was he, but there was no flinching in his eyes, no tremor in the tone of his strong voice.

"*My darling,*" said Antony, "*will you marry me this week?* As God is my witness, it is my dearest wish. As God is my witness, I will make you happy."

At the opposite side of the bed Mrs. Maplestone subsided helplessly into tears. Writhing, gasping

in pain, the Squire muttered to himself, "What a fuss to make! What a fuss about nothing!"

To Juliet, as to Antony, they might have been at the other side of the world. They had ceased to exist. He stood, drawn up to his full height, gazing down into her face. She looked up, looked deep, deep into the steady brown eyes, and read therein what she most longed to see.

"Yes, Tony, I will. The sooner the better," answered Juliet. And, so saying, started trustfully upon life's greatest adventure.

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IV

THE MAN WHO WAITED FOR LOVE

BEHIND his tired eyes and general affectation of indifference Rupert Dempster hid an overwhelming ambition. He longed for love—not for the ordinary springtide passion experienced by ninety-nine men out of a hundred; nor for the ordinary "living-prosaically-ever-after" which is the ultimate sequel to such affairs. The desire of his heart was for the experience of the hundredth man,—an experience as far distinguished from the amours of the ninety-nine, as is the romance of the suburban Algernon and Angelina, from the historic passion of a Dante and Beatrice. Rupert searched not so much for a wife as for a mate, a woman who should be so completely the complement of himself that to meet would be to recognize, and after recognition life apart would become an impossibility and a farce. In his own mind the conviction remained unshaken that the day *would* dawn when he should meet this dearer self, and

enter into a completeness of joy which would end but with life itself. Yet the years passed by, and his thirty-fifth birthday came and went, and found him no nearer his goal. Once and again as the years passed by, Rupert awoke, breathless and panting, from a dream, the same dream, wherein he had met his love, and they had spoken together. The details of the dream seemed instantly to fade from his mind, leaving behind an impression of mingled joy and pain. She had been beautiful and sweet; he had been proud and glad, yet there had been a shadow. It had not been all joy that he had felt as he had welcomed the well-beloved; his emotion on awaking had been tinged with something strangely resembling fear. But the dream-face had been fair. His longing to meet it was but whetted by the consciousness of mystery.

He met her at last at a garden-party and gained an introduction by accident. "Do find Lady Belcher, and bring her to have some tea," his hostess bade him, and supplemented her request with a brief description: "A tall, dark woman, dressed in yellow. She was on that bench a few minutes ago. Anyone will tell you! . . ."

Rupert crossed the lawn in the direction indicated; he was in the mood of resigned boredom which possesses most men at a garden-party, and

for the moment the Dream Woman had no place in his thoughts. Lady Belcher was plainly a guest of importance, for whose refreshment the hostess felt herself responsible. She was probably elderly, and, as such, uninteresting from a young man's standpoint. He looked for the gleam of a yellow dress, caught it defined sharply among the surrounding blues and pinks, and drew up in front of the seat.

"Lady Belcher, I think? Mrs. Melhuish has sent me to ask you if you will have some tea?"

Lady Belcher was talking volubly to an acquaintance on the subject of the shortcomings of her friends, and was much bored by the interruption. She lifted a face like an elderly rocking-horse, and made short work of the invitation.

"Thanks! Couldn't possibly. I abhor tea," she said curtly, and immediately resumed the interrupted conversation.

Dempster turned, faintly smiling. He was accustomed to the rudeness of the modern society woman, and it had no power to hurt him. On the contrary, he congratulated himself on having escaped an unwelcome task. He turned aside with a sigh of relief, and even as he turned, the ordered beating of his heart seemed for a moment to cease, and leave his being suspended in space. Cut

sharply in twain, as by the sweep of a scythe, the old life fell from him and the new life began, for there, but a couple of yards away, stood the Dream Woman, her eyes gazing steadily into his!

She was a tall, slim woman, no longer in her first youth, but her face had a strange, arresting beauty. Hair and eyes were dark, and there was something curiously un-English in the modelling of the features, something subtly suggestive of a fiercer, more primal race. So might a woman have looked whose far-off ancestor had been an Indian brave, bequeathing to future generations some spark of his own wild vigour. The lips were scarlet, a thin, curved line in the pallor of her face; her eyes were fringed with black, straight lashes. She wore a gown of cloudy black, and there came to Rupert, with a cramping of the heart, the swift conviction that she was unhappy.

She was looking at him, half frowning, half smiling, having, it would appear, overheard his invitation and its rebuff; but as his face came more clearly into view a look of bewilderment overspread her features. She started, and involuntarily bent her head in salutation.

The next moment Rupert was by her side, and her hand lay in his. He had extended his own, and hers had come to meet it without hesitation.

For a long moment they looked at one another in silence, then he spoke in commonplace greeting:

"Good afternoon. Can I get *you* some tea?"

She shook her head, but at the same time took a slow step forward, which had the effect of turning the refusal into an invitation.

"I'm so tired; I don't want anything, but a seat; away from that band!"

"Come this way. There's a summer-house at the end of the shrubbery that is probably empty. No one knows of it but the intimates. You can rest there quietly."

He spoke eagerly, walking beside her, eager to lead her away from the crowd, and have her to himself. The group of visitors among whom she had been standing stared after them curiously, and one elderly, stout woman took a tentative step forward, as if about to follow, thought better of it, and stood aside. Dempster had a fleeting suspicion of sharp eyes scanning his face; then he forgot everything but his companion. He was conscious of every movement, of every curve of the slim, graceful figure, but no word was spoken until they seated themselves within the shelter of the arbour, and faced each other across its narrow span. Was it the shadow of the trailing branches which made her face so white? She narrowed her

eyes, as if searching in the store-room of memory, and a faint smile curved her lips. Once again the pain cramped Rupert's heart as he realized that smiles came but hardly to her lips. A note of interrogation quickened her voice:

"I know you so well. . . We have met before?"

He leaned forward, elbows on knees, chin cupped between finger and thumb, tired eyes aglow with life.

"Yes!"

"When? Where?"

"Always!" he told her. "In our dreams."

She shrank at that, edging back into her corner, holding out a quick, protesting hand. "No! Please! Don't make fun. . . We have met on more substantial ground. I know your face. I knew it the moment you turned. We have met years ago, and have forgotten——"

Rupert sat motionless, his eyes riveted upon her face. "Think!" he urged softly. "Think! Ask your own heart, and let it answer. It spoke clearly enough a minute ago. You have *always* known me! You have been waiting, as I have been waiting. It has been long, and we are both tired, but now it is over, and we can forget. Our summer has begun!" He stretched out his hand towards her.

"I've been keeping myself for you. From this moment I am yours, and all that I have. The world would call me crazy to make such a vow to a woman I have known in the flesh for only a few minutes, but *you* understand! *You* know that it is the simple, absolute truth. Give me your hand!"

Like a homing-bird the small hand fluttered and fell, nestling softly against his own. He pressed his lips to it in a long, sacramental kiss, then raised himself to look into her eyes. "What is your name?"

"Eve. And yours?"

"Rupert. I am glad that you are Eve. The first woman; the only woman. No other name could have fitted you so well. Eve! look in my eyes, and answer what I ask. Do you trust me, Eve? Do you believe that I am speaking the truth?"

White as a dead woman, she faced him across the shadow; the scarlet of her lips was like a stain of blood, but as she gazed her face quivered into an inexpressible tenderness, for on Rupert Dempster's features nature had printed the hall-mark of truth, and no one had yet looked into his eyes and doubted his word. The Dream Woman accepted it so simply that she did not trouble to

answer his question. "I am not worth it," she said instead; "I am too old; too sad. It ought to have been a lovely, radiant girl who could have given you her youth."

"I have thought of her like that," he answered simply, "but I see now that it could not have been. I needed more. She could not have satisfied me, if she had not suffered. I should have missed the greatest joy of all, if she had not needed my comfort."

"I wish I were beautiful!" she sighed again. "She should have been beautiful to be worthy of you. I wish I were beautiful!"

"Are you not beautiful?" he asked her. "It is strange; I had thought so much of how you would look, but when our eyes met I forgot all that. We belong; that is everything. The beginning and the end. You are Eve."

"Ah, you are good!" she sighed. "You are good! I did not know there were such men in the world. . . It is true, Rupert. You must have been with me in my dreams, for there is nothing new about you, nothing strange. I know your face as I know my own, and it is rest to be with you—rest and peace. It must have been meant that we should meet to-day, for it is the first time for—oh, so long, that I have been to any

public place!" She cast a quick glance at her black dress, and an involuntary shudder shook her frame. "But to-day I felt better, and it was so bright, and they persuaded me. I have dreaded meeting people, but to-day I didn't mind. I think I *wanted* to come. And then I saw you, and your face was so familiar that I thought I had met you long ago and had forgotten."

"You had not forgotten. You had never remembered anything so well. In that first moment you *knew* that I was different from the rest. It was written on your face, dear; there was no need for words! There is something else written there which hurts me to see. I think you have needed me, Eve!"

She drew her hand from his and pressed it to her head with a gesture more eloquent than words. Rupert's presentiment of trouble had been true; it now remained to discover the nature of her grief.

He was conscious of steadying himself mentally and morally, before he possessed himself of the disengaged left hand, which lay on her lap. Deftly, tenderly, his fingers felt hers, moving tentatively upwards over the joints, feeling with trembling anxiety for the presence of rings, of *the* ring! The shock at finding the tell-tale third finger bare was almost as largely compounded of surprise as of

joy, so strong had been the presentiment of a husband in the background. The eyes which he raised to hers were radiant with joy, but there was no answering gleam in the depths into which he gazed. Their sombre gloom chilled him in the midst of his ecstasy.

"Eve," he cried softly, "smile at me! I was wrong to conjure up dead ghosts to-day when we ought to think of nothing but the happiness of meeting. Eve! I have been preparing for you all these years; now I am free to do as you will. It is for you to order, and I shall obey. We will go where you will, live where you choose——"

"You will take me away?" She bent forward, her eyes peering into his, so that he saw more closely than he had done before the beautiful, ravaged face, with its slumbering passion, its deep, overmastering gloom. There shrilled through her voice an almost incredible joy. "*You—will—take —me away?*"

Dempster laughed happily. Aye, indeed, he would take her away. She was free, there was no barrier between them; openly, honourably, before all the world he could claim her as his own—could make her his wife with all the stately ritual of the Church.

"Of course I will take you away! Do you im-

agine, after all these years, I will wait a day longer than I can help? Now that I have found you, I shan't easily let you go." And, with his whole being thrilling in answer to her appeal, "You *want* to come to me, Eve?" he asked her.

"Yes," she sighed softly, "yes!" Her lips parted in a long-drawn sigh of content. "You are so good. Your goodness rests me. That's what I need more than anything else—rest!" With the same tragic gesture she pressed her fingers against her brow, then, with a sudden impulse, sweet, and girlish, and unexpected, clasped his hand in hers, and repeated the gesture, bending her head to meet the healing touch.

There was no need of words to explain the meaning of the action, the message flashed from eye to eye with silent eloquence. For the moment the shadow lifted, and Dempster gazed into a face illumined by love and tenderness. Only for a moment; then suddenly came the sound of unwelcome footsteps, and peering through the trailing branches Rupert beheld a middle-aged couple pacing slowly by, glancing curiously to right and left, yet remaining happily unconscious of the arbour behind the trees. He recognized the woman as the one who had been standing by Eve's side in the garden, and wondered with a passing

amusement if curiosity had sent her to see what had become of her companion. How far she was from guessing the high happenings of those short moments!

In the midst of his amusement he felt Eve grasp his arm, and draw him back into the shadow. It was joy to feel that her dread of interruption was as keen as his own, and he turned to her a look of glad understanding, but the tragic misery on her face chilled him once more.

It was inconceivable that the annoyance of a temporary interruption could call forth such intensity of feeling, and Dempster, regarding her, felt his own nerves thrill with a kindred fear. For one glad moment he had believed that his happiness was assured; now he realized that he had rejoiced too soon. There *were* barriers to be overcome—mysterious barriers which loomed before him, dark and lowering. He caught the slight form in his arms, cradling it with pitiful tenderness.

"My darling! My darling! You are afraid. Of *what* are you afraid? I am here—no one can harm you. Give me your dear hands! Lean against me! The whole world cannot separate us, Eve, if we choose to be together. Why are you afraid?"

He felt the shudder that ran through her limbs.

Close against his ear her lips trembled over the words:

"I am afraid of losing you; of being left alone! They will try to separate us. If they knew what we had been planning, they would plot together so that we might not meet. You are strong, but they are stronger, and I am in their power. . . . Take me away, Rupert, take me now, or it will be too late!"

He took her hand, and raised it solemnly to his lips.

"I swear to you," he said, "that I will take you. I swear that I will be the truest and most faithful of husbands so long as God gives me life!"

"I swear to you," she cried in response, "that I will be a true wife. Whatever has happened, whatever may come, I swear that you shall never regret it. I will love you; I will be your slave. Nothing, nothing can be too much!"

They clung together in silence. The nearness, the stillness, the deep welling of joy in the sweet human contact, were all-engrossing. Rupert would fain have banished all difficulties into the future, and given himself up to untrammelled enjoyment of the hour, but the urgency of Eve's appeal forbade postponement.

He raised himself, supporting her in his arms.

"Eve! from this moment you and I are one. What belongs to one, belongs to the other; we can have no secrets, no concealments. If there are difficulties in our way, I must be prepared to meet them. Who is this woman? What right has she or anyone else to dictate what you should or should not do?"

Her eyes gazed back into his with a deep, unseeing gaze, the delicate eyebrows creased as if in an effort of thought; then once again she lifted her hand and pressed it against her brow. Poignantly beautiful, poignantly sad, she sat and gave him her answer.

"I live with them," she said quietly. "They take care of me. I think—I think I am mad!"

Rupert Dempster lost no time in questioning his hostess as to the history of the Dream Woman who had come to fill such a real place in his life. As soon as the guests had departed he put in a plea for a private conversation, whereupon Mrs. Melhuish seated herself on a chair at the farther side of the lawn, and drew a long breath of mingled fatigue, and relief.

"That's over, thank goodness! This annual garden-party to the neighbourhood looms over me

like a nightmare. I feel ten years younger when the last carriage has driven away from the door. Now! what can I do for you? But I know, of course. You've fallen a victim to Eve Bisdée and her *beaux yeux*. They *are* beautiful! It's about once in a lifetime that one meets an Englishwoman with such eyes as hers. It seems superfluous to have a tongue, when all that one feels can be expressed so eloquently in a glance. Even now her eyes are wonderful; but if you'd seen her as a girl, before——"

"Before what? That's what I am waiting to hear. What happened to her? Some tragedy, of course. Tell me about it."

Mrs. Melhuish gave him a searching glance.

"You realized that—that she is not—like other people?"

Rupert's smile was half sad, half triumphant.

"Not in the least like other people. But we can discuss that later on. I am waiting for your story."

Mrs. Melhuish leaned her head on her hand and her face fell into thoughtful lines.

"I've known Eve since she was a girl of eighteen—the loveliest thing!—and as gay and sweet as she was lovely. She was an only child, and her parents adored her, and—what is by no means so

usual!—she adored them in return. They were not rich—quite poor, in fact; but the family was exceptional, and everyone visited them. When Eve came out, Mrs. Bisdée used to give charming little evenings, so simple and unpretentious, but so well done. Eve was so different, too, from the ordinary fair, placid English girl that she made quite a sensation in the county. We expected her to make a great match. Then one day they were all travelling together to Burnham to attend a hunt ball, and the train they were in—" Mrs. Melhuish shuddered, as at a terrible remembrance. "You will remember it—the Tunford accident—a terrible affair! Over sixty passengers killed in the most appalling circumstances. Eve escaped. She was travelling with a friend in the rear part of the train. They were pulled out and carried up the bank, and there that poor child stood and looked on, helpless, maddened, while her parents and the other poor wretches in the wrecked carriages lay pinned down, devoured by the flames. Oh, my dear man, we read of such things, we agonize over them, or we *think* we agonize, but imagine the real thing! Seeing, hearing, within a few yards, yet as powerless to help as though one were at the other side of the world. . . Well! Eve went through that torture, and it wrecked her

life. She had brain fever, and when that passed, her mind remained—what shall I say?—*clouded*. Yes, that's the right word. It expresses exactly the truth. There is a cloud hanging over her, shutting out the sun. Her memory is impaired, so that she does not remember any actual event; but there is an impression of horror and dread. It is ten years since the accident, and the cloud has not lifted. She lives with our doctor and his wife; they are good, honest people, and do their best; but I wish sometimes she could have a change. At the best of times they are not her type, and after ten years together——"

"You say that the cloud has not lifted. Is she *no* better than at the beginning of the time?"

"Oh, yes! When one looks back over the years one can see that there is improvement. Her health is better, and she has lost her dread of society. At times, as you saw her to-day, one would hardly realize that she was not normal. But the cloud falls. She is always sweet, always gentle, but terrible, terribly sad."

"But she *is* better," Rupert insisted. "She is going to get quite well. I am going to make her well. . . Mrs. Melhuish"—he leaned forward, his hand on the arm of her chair—"you are my very kind friend. It is only right that I should tell

you at once. . . . I am going to marry Eve Bisdée!"

"My *dear* Rupert!" cried Mrs. Melhuish deeply. Her face flushed, her mild eye showed a flash of anger. She was shocked—more than shocked, outraged. Her voice took an edge of coldness. "Really, this is too much. Eve is a most appealing creature, and it is natural that a man should feel chivalrous and protective when he hears her history. But marriage! That's unthinkable! It offends me. Please think of what you are saying!"

Rupert lifted his hand and laid it gently on hers. They were old friends, these two, and for years back had been able to speak together frankly without fear of offence.

"Wait!" he said. "Listen to what I have to say before you give your verdict. What I propose to do may be unusual, but it is eminently sane. I propose to change places with that doctor, and to see what I can do towards removing that cloud. There is only one way in which I can gain the right, and that is by going through a form of marriage. Therefore a form of marriage it must be. Don't look at me in that commiserating manner, dear lady! This is not philanthropy, it's not pity. I am going to undertake this thing because I want to do it more than anything on earth! Now do you

understand? You know my ideas about love. We have talked of them together, and you know for what I have been waiting. It came to me this afternoon, at the moment when Eve's eyes looked into mine. From that moment there was no going back."

"My dear Rupert!" cried Mrs. Melhuish again. The anger had faded from her face, but she looked infinitely distressed. With all her heart she wished that this meeting had never taken place. "My dear Rupert, to have waited so long, and then to rush into folly like this! I do know your ideas, and very beautiful they are; all the more reason why you should make no mistake. There is always the reverse side of the picture, and as you can love more keenly than other men, so of a certainty can you suffer more. You may feel powerfully attracted to poor Eve, but you have no idea of the strain and weariness of battling with a mind diseased. It's hard enough when such a task comes to one as an obvious duty, but to *choose* it!"

"I did not choose it," Rupert said quietly. "There is no question of choice. It has to be. Don't make it harder for me by misunderstanding. For a moment I thought my kingdom had come, but that was a mistake. I have met my Queen, but I shall have to serve for her before she is really

mine. Seven years I may have to serve—perhaps for twice seven years. Do you think a man would deliberately *choose* such a fate? It's something stronger than choice between Eve and me. The simple truth is that I have no object in life but to help her to get back to the light. I'll tell you something else, too—*I'm the only man who can do it!* I possess a power over her which no doctor or nurse could obtain. Good heavens! Haven't they had ten years for their experiments? How much longer would you have me content to stand by and wait? If she has any relations, they must be thankful to give her a chance of being cared for, for love instead of money. I'll find her a nurse, the best nurse that can be had. We'll take her abroad to live in the sun, away from all her old associations. She is afraid of those people—did you know that? She is not afraid of me. She *wants* to come. My dear lady, this thing is going to *be!* The question is—am I to have your help?"

Mrs. Melhuish was not easily convinced, but she was conquered in the end, as were, in turns, the few relatives whom Eve possessed. All had been conscious that the time had come to make a change, and no more promising change could be imagined than the one proposed. From Eve's own point of view, that was to say! For Dempster it was a

different matter. The relations felt it their duty to argue with him, to point out that he was recklessly shattering his life. But Dempster smiled, and persisted.

Very well, then! let him have his way. So Rupert and Eve were married, and immediately after set sail for Egypt.

One midsummer afternoon two years later, Rupert Dempster walked along an exquisite stretch of road in North Wales which divides the rocky course of the river Dee from a sleepy canal with fern-covered banks, and an overhanging arch of green. After the blazing Eastern lands in which the past years had been spent, the dewy loveliness of the scene was a delight to the senses. On every side rose the crests of green, smiling hills; the river broke into ripples of foam round the scattered rocks which strewed its bed. Along the still stream to the left floated a miniature barge, carrying a gay awning overhead. This was the omnibus of the neighbourhood, plying up and down the stream several times a day, and even as Rupert watched, its slow course was stayed, and one of the passengers alighted and walked slowly towards him.

She was a slightly-made girl with a noticeable

daintiness of movement. Under her wide-brimmed hat her face showed small and pale, and her hair was of a light flaxen hue. Rupert knitted his brow, and his pace quickened instinctively. The girl walked with her eyes on the ground, oblivious of his approach. Another moment and they were side by side, and Rupert gave a cry of recognition.

"Lilith! It is Lilith! What an extraordinary chance, to meet you here! My dear Lilith, I am so pleased to see you."

And indeed there was unmistakable pleasure in his voice; the somewhat worn face lightened with animation. He gripped the girl's hand with eager fingers, and she smiled back at him, a calm, unperturbed smile, as though she had parted from him but an hour before.

"How do you do, Rupert? Are you staying down here? Is Mrs. Dempster with you?"

"Yes. We have taken the house just behind those trees. Do you know it? You cross the next bridge, and follow the lane to the left."

"Yes, I know it. I'm staying at the Inn."

Lilith walked by his side, her eyes quietly searching his face, but having vouchsafed these bare words of information, she added nothing more. The silence lasted for several minutes, nevertheless it was with an overwhelming impres-

sion of answering a question, that Rupert spoke again, saying slowly:

"She is better, but she is not cured. The attacks of depression come on less frequently, but they still come. We are tring to ward off another at this moment. She grew tired of the East. For a time she delighted in it, and the novelty took her out of herself; but it became wearisome—the eternal glare, the absence of green, the medley of tongues. She wanted to come home. We've been wandering about for the last four months, and landed here last week. It's a charming spot, and *peaceful*. It ought to do her good!"

There was an appeal in his voice which a woman's ear should have been quick to read, but Lilith made no response. She turned her strange, expressionless eyes first on the silent, shaded canal, then on the river, sparkling in the sun, its waters beating against the jagged rocks. Until that moment Rupert had regarded the two streams from an artistic standpoint only, now of a sudden they seemed charged with a spiritual meaning. Peace and storm, stagnation and action, life and death,—he saw them all in the contrast between those two streams, and for the first time a doubt crept into his mind whether he had done well for Eve in shielding her from the great current of life, and

lapping her round with eternal calm. He turned abruptly to the girl and put another question:

"Will you come with me now and see her? I think perhaps you might do her good."

"Yes, I will come," Lilith answered, with a courteous indifference at which Rupert smiled with grim amusement. For two long years he had guarded his treasure with never-ceasing vigilance, finding for her the most secluded retreats, where no alien eye should disturb her repose; avoiding the society of his fellow-creatures as if it had been the plague. And now at last he had invited an outsider to disturb that calm, and she had received the honour with the indifference accorded to the most ordinary of invitations! But, after all, what had he expected? Who had ever yet seen Lilith moved out of her colossal calm!

Rupert led the way towards his temporary home, opened the gate, and escorted Lilith through a brilliant tangle of garden to the front of the house, where several long chairs were ranged along a shaded veranda. On one of these lay Eve, in a reverie so deep that the new-comers had time to take in the details of her appearance before she was aware of their approach.

She wore a white dress, the skirt of which was scattered with the petals of crimson roses, which

her restless hands had pulled asunder. Her head was tilted back on the cushion, showing the beautiful line of the throat; her face was ivory white, and the curved bow of her lips showed vividly, startingly red. Even that first glance brought an impression of strain and unrest; and as her ear at last caught the sound of the approaching footsteps, she leaped upward with a gesture of alarm. Her eyes fell upon Lilith's figure and distended in wild distress, but the next moment she beheld Rupert, and in a flash the fear disappeared and was replaced by the most melting tenderness. She came forward with the shy grace of a child, slipped her hand into his, and stood passively waiting for what it should please him to do next. Anyone who doubted if Rupert Dempster's love had stood the strain of those two long years of waiting would have found his answer in one glimpse at the man's face as he stood holding that little hand in his.

"Eve! this is an old friend. I met her walking by the river, and asked her to come and see you. Her name is Lilith Wastneys. You remember it, don't you? I have spoken to you about her."

"Yes, I remember," Eve said. She took her hand from her husband's, and held it out towards Lilith with a graceful gesture of greeting. Her eyes dwelt on the small, composed face with an

expression of incredulous surprise. "You wished for Power! That seemed strange to me when I heard it, and now that I have seen you it seems stranger still. You look so small and gentle. I wonder what made you wish for Power!"

Lilith's smile was as inscrutable as her eyes. She answered simply by making another statement:

"And Rupert wished for love."

"He has got it!" said Eve deeply. She gave one glance at her husband—a wonderful, liquid glance, then turned back to her guest. "Won't you sit down? I sit in the veranda to be out of the sun. I am so tired of the sun. In the East it is cruel, blazing down day after day, mocking at the shadows. But the shadows are there—it cannot chase them away." She leaned back on her cushions. "Here all is so cool and calm, and the rain falls. That feels like nature weeping with us. I like to watch the rain. Have *you* a pretty garden to sit in?"

"I am staying at the Inn. I don't want a garden. I can have that at home. When I want to rest I walk over the stepping-stones into the middle of the river. There is a big rock there which forms a kind of natural arm-chair. I can sit on it, looking down the stream, and no one can see me from the bank, for the rock rises up like a wall

nearly all the way round. To sit there is like a peep into another life; a mermaid's life, all grey rock, and splashing foam, and soft, ceaseless roar. When you listen to that roar from the bank it sounds harsh and monotonous. You are on another element, you see, so it is alien to you, and has no meaning, but on the rock you are part of the river itself. It tells you its secrets. You can understand!"

As she finished speaking, Lilith's heavy lids lifted, and her eyes flashed with a sudden light. There was a moment's silence; then Eve bent forward on her seat, while a wave of colour flamed into her pale cheeks.

"*Will you take me with you?*" she cried breathlessly. "Will you take me *now?* There is something I am always trying to hear—a secret which I am always trying to find out, and no one can help me. Perhaps the river will tell me my secret. . . Take me with you, and let me try!"

. . . . . .

Eve was fascinated with the rocky seat, and spent hours of each day ensconced thereon. The river was so low that it was easy to step from one rock to another, and Rupert would see her comfortably settled, and then leave her to take the brisk walk over the hills which was his usual exer-

cise. Eve preferred to be alone for part of the day, and he had no fear of leaving her. There had never been any suicidal tendency in her derangement; rather did she cling to life, and shrink from the thought of death. And the river soothed her, she said; the murmuring voice seemed to whisper of happiness and peace, but as yet it was only a murmur. In vain she strained her ears; the message eluded her, and floated vaguely into space. "Louder!" she would cry. "Louder!" But the river floated sleepily on its course, and refused to be aroused.

A week passed by, and Rupert grew restless and uneasy. Eve was still obsessed with love of her river seat, but the strain of listening for the message which never came added to her depression, and it irked him to feel that she was deliberately courting a disappointment which he was powerless to relieve.

"It can do no good," he told Lilith impatiently, "and it may do great harm. I have been so careful to screen her from every kind of excitement or strain, so that the brain should have time to rest."

"Or stagnate?" suggested Lilith coldly. "She has had—how many years is it—ten or twelve?—of this wrapping in cotton wool, and she has progressed—how far should you call it—one inch, or

two? How much longer shall you be content with inches? If she were in my charge——"

Rupert stopped and faced her in the narrow path. There was a hint of roughness in his manner. When a man is strung to the finest point of tension it is not always easy to preserve the conventions. "It is easy to boast when one has had no experience! *What* would you do if she were in your charge?"

"Neglect her, ignore her, leave her to fend for herself! You and that drudge of a nurse imagine that you are helping by waiting on her hand and foot. What if instead you are sapping her vitality, and stealing her chance of life? What do you leave for her to do, except to breathe? If you could breathe for her, you would relieve her of that also! You make her into a doll, and expect the doll to live! She is asleep, and you feed her with drugs. Better a thousand times to waken her out of her sleep, even if it be to suffer. It was a shock which deadened the brain; it may be that only a shock can rouse it to life again!"

"Ah!" cried Rupert bitterly. "I have heard that theory before. It's a devilish theory! My poor Eve! She has been tortured enough; she shall be tortured no more. It was the horror of what she saw and heard which caused the mischief

in the beginning. The one thing I am thankful for in this loss of memory is that that horror has faded."

Lilith looked at him with her steady eyes.

"Have you ever been delirious?" she asked him. "Not for an odd hour here and there, but for days together, stretching out into weeks? I *have;* and I know. Nothing real can approach the horror of the unknown. There is no beginning to it, and no end. It's a great cloud darkening the sky; it presses lower, lower, strangling the breath. There is no hope in it, no appeal. Your wife saw her parents killed before her eyes. I tell you the memory of the truth would be peaceful, compared with this struggle in the darkness. She would realize that it was over, that they were at rest; that it would pain them if she went mourning all her life. I tell you, Rupert, the only chance of Eve's recovery is to shock her into remembrance!"

"And if it were, if it were?"—he turned upon her fiercely as though battling against an inner conviction. "A shock strong enough to revolutionize the brain lies in the hands of Providence, to give or to retain. What man dare meddle with such a cure? I love my wife; she is my world. Am I to risk her life for a possible relief? To deliberately court danger that she—she—" He

threw out his arms with a gesture of intolerable impatience. "Oh, it is unthinkable! You don't know what you are talking about. It is easy for you to talk. You have no heart. You cannot feel——"

He strode away up the road leading to the hills, and Lilith stood and watched him go, and picked a leaf of sorrel from the bank by her side and rubbed it daintily between her small teeth, enjoying the sharp, pungent taste. Rupert's anger had no power to ruffle her calm.

By and by she also started on her morning promenade, passing by the gate of Dempster's house, and catching a glimpse of Eve upon the veranda. There had been thunder-storms in the neighbourhood during the last few days, and though the actual storms had not yet reached their little retreat, the atmosphere was heavy and breathless. That morning Eve had complained of a headache, and had seemed content to remain in the garden. As she passed by, Lilith saw the nurse come out of the gate, basket in hand, and turn in the direction of the canal bank. Evidently she was bound for the barge-omnibus, which should convey her to the nearest township. Lilith repaired to her own room in the Inn, and set about the task of answering a pile of letters.

Two hours passed quickly. Then gradually into her preoccupation stole the sense of something unusual and disturbing. She raised her head, and sat quietly considering its cause. The little room seemed filled with a rushing noise; it was not a new noise, but rather an exaggeration of the one to which she had been accustomed for weeks past—the swirling of the river.

Lilith rose, and crossed the room to the latticed window. The Inn stood on the bisecting road between canal and river, within but a few yards' distance of each; but this morning a strange transformation had passed over the accustomed scene. The waters of the river were no longer crystal clear, but of a thick muddy brown; their course was no longer smiling and leisurely, but rapid and threatening. Upon the surface floated broken branches and boughs of trees.

Lilith turned instantly and descended the stairs. A sense of happenings was upon her; there was no time to waste.

At the door of the Inn stood the landlord, his broad face lit by a smile of satisfaction. Life was sleepy in this quiet vale; he welcomed a passing excitement.

"The river is in flood, miss!" he cried genially. "Yes, indeed, we shall have a big flood! There were

bad thunder-storms this last week up in the hills in Merioneth, where the river rises, and all the streams will be swollen, and pouring down into the lake. It was the same in the spring five years ago, when my Willie was born. Yes, indeed, the roar of it woke us in the middle of the night. Look at the colour of it now, miss, and the speed! Soon there will not be a rock to be seen. Yes, indeed, it will be a fine sight, the river, when it will be in flood!"

He was beaming with innocent enjoyment. His face fell like that of a thwarted child when the visitor turned, without as much as a word, and walked down the path; he stared after her blankly, then shrugged his shoulders, and ambled heavily back inside the Inn.

Lilith walked with rapid footsteps; her lips were set, but her eyes roamed. They turned upward towards the house among the trees where she had left Eve seated on the veranda. Assuredly Eve was there still; she had a headache, and had announced her decision to remain at home. This morning, for once, the river seat had lost its allure. Of a certainty Eve was still on her veranda. Nevertheless Lilith's footsteps grew quicker; straight as a die she made for the point on the bank opposite to the chain of stepping-stones.

No trace of an occupant was to be seen on the central islet, but a stronger sense than that of sight was at work in Lilith's brain. All the arguments in the world were powerless to deceive her. Eve was on the rock! She knew it. It was the truth.

On the edge of the road stood the stump of an old tree, the nearest fork of which stood four or five feet from the ground. Lilith grasped it with both hands, and with an agile movement drew her knees up to the level. The rest was easy; she took another grasp of the trunk, drew up her feet and stood, supporting herself on either side, gazing over the stream.

Yes! the inner certitude had been correct. Against the dull grey of the rock lay the folds of a white dress, the gleam of scarlet from a folded parasol, a dark head lay tilted backward towards the sky. Eve was there, asleep, or wrapped in one of her trance-like reveries in which she was unconscious of passing events. She would see nothing, hear nothing, until the mood passed and she became conscious of a desire for movement. For half an hour to come, perhaps for an hour, she would remain oblivious, and, meanwhile, with every moment the stream was rising and gaining more deadly swiftness.

Lilith crooked one arm round the bough of the tree and raised bent hands to her mouth. The stepping-stones were still well above water. She would send her piercing "coo-ee" across the stream and continue to send it, until the unusual character of the sound attracted Eve's attention, then she would go to meet her, and help her to the bank. There would be no danger, only a spice of excitement; a thrilling realization of what might have been. No more.

Lilith pursed her lips to give the signal, but the signal did not come. Poised in the very attitude of preparation, a sudden change of expression showed in her still eyes, or rather an arrestment of expression; the features remained fixed and immovable, while the brain worked.

For one long minute she stood motionless, then, slowly, her hands fell to her sides; she bent downwards until once more her knees rested on the fork of the tree, from hence she let herself gently to the ground. No one had seen her. The Innkeeper was busy; the road stretched ahead bare and empty. No one would interfere.

Lilith walked to the nearest bridge, crossed it and seated herself on a sloping bank. The ground was raised above the level of the canal, and by raising her head she could see the chain of stepping-

stones leading to the rocky islet. She folded her hands in her lap and watched. The sun shone out from behind a leaden bank of clouds, and beat on her face. What was the expression of Lilith's face? There was strength on it, an immense, all-conquering strength; there was the mark of strain, in deepened line and close-set lip; but there was something else—something dominating, overriding. It shone in the eyes; the pose of the head showed it, the beating pulse in the throat. It was joy—primitive, triumphant joy!

The stepping-stones grew small and smaller; above the dark swirl of the river their grey surfaces caught the sun and gleamed into silver. Once and anon branches of a tree borne down by the flood were caught by one of these islets and for a moment held bound, then the swirl and the rush overcame, and they were swept relentlessly onward. Lilith's lips tightened as she watched them pass.

Ten minutes passed; twenty minutes; the silver gleams made but tiny spaces above the flood. Lilith rose to her feet and stood poised for flight.

Another five minutes and the waters lapped over the surface of the smallest stone. Like an arrow from the bow, Lilith flew across the bridge, down the path to the little Inn.

"Help! Help! The ropes! . . . A lady is on one of the rocks. The lady from Plas Glynn. The ropes! Quick! Quick!"

The ropes hung coiled in the entrance of the Inn. It was not the river which was the danger, but the shaded, sleeping canal. Many a pedestrian had taken a false step off that fern-bordered bank, and had had a sore struggle for his life. The Innkeeper's own son had had this struggle. The ropes were ready, noosed at the end—long, stout ropes, for use, not play. The Innkeeper seized them from their pegs and followed Lilith down the path. Afterwards he recalled that it was she who issued orders, and he who obeyed. He lashed the end of the ropes round the stump of the old tree. One noose was put round his own waist, the other he carried in his hand. The young lady stood by to let out their length, but before he could start, a cry sounded from behind, a terrible cry from the depths of a tortured heart, and Rupert Dempster fell upon him, and wrenched the ropes from his hand.

They lifted their voices, the two men and the girl, and sent forth a ringing cry of alarm; once, twice, they sent it forth, while Rupert felt his way to the first wave-lashed stone, and at the third cry Eve's white figure appeared in the aperture between the rocks.

The sight on which she looked was enough to turn the strongest head—the waste of waters where there had been a bubbling stream, the swirling current covering the way of retreat; yet to the onlookers there appeared no sign of distress in Eve's attitude. The lurid sun still shown down, shaft-like through the clouds, and showed her white figure in vivid distinctness. She was bending forward, gazing, not at the shore, but upward across the flood. Her ear was bent low, as though listening to its voice. . . .

Rupert turned back from the first stone, threw off his shoes, and started afresh. Once and again his foot slipped, and he swayed perilously to right and left, but always he recovered himself, and pressed on steadfastly towards the rock where stood his wife, motionless, bending forward towards the stream.

He was by her side, standing on the same foothold, before she was conscious of his presence; then he spoke her name, and she turned her eyes upon him. Oh, God in heaven, they were *sane* eyes! Clear, straight-glancing eyes. *Sane* eyes, full of thankfulness and peace!

"I remember!" she cried loudly. "I remember! The river has told me. Oh, Rupert I am free. . . ."

"Come!" he said simply, and took her hand.

There was no time to waste, for the flood was rushing on its way, and the perilous passage had still to be made; but there was no fear in either heart. Nothing on earth or sea could mar the rapture of that moment. After long waiting and heart-sickness the cloud had lifted, and the shadows had taken wing. He read the change in her eyes, the very touch of her hand within his told the same tale. It was no longer weak and helpless; her fingers clasped his with a strong, resolute grasp, giving help as well as receiving. The Dream Woman had come to life!

From the bank the stepping-stones had disappeared from sight, and to the dazzled eyes of the onlookers it seemed as though two disembodied spirits came walking towards them across the waters, their faces lit with an unearthly radiance.

When the bank was reached, they turned, and made their way towards the house, unconscious of the existence of the watchers. Hand in hand they crossed the bridge and mounted the sloping path. . . .

The Innkeeper hitched his shoulders and drew a trembling breath.

"It was a near thing, look you! As near a shave as ever I seen. . . . That was a good thing,

missy, that you caught sight of her just at the right moment!"

Lilith's heavy eyelids drooped over her eyes.

"Yes," she said sleepily, "the very right moment!"

V

THE GIRL WHO WISHED FOR POWER

Two men proposed to Lilith Wastneys at the same ball and in the same palm-shaded retreat. She was not surprised, because she had willed that they should speak, and people had a habit of doing as Lilith willed. Very early in her life she had discovered that if she said nothing, and thought hard, that thought had a power to mould others to her will.

It was not often that she put forth her power, for her attitude towards her fellows was one of lofty detachment. They were commonplace creatures —weak, vacillating creatures, swayed to and fro by the emotions of the hour. Lilith had never in her life been swayed; never for the fraction of a second had she been uncertain of her own mind; all the temptations in the world could not lure her a step from a premeditated path, but because Nature had cast her in a fragile mould, and given her flaxen hair and a baby skin, and minute morsels of

hands and feet, the world adopted protective airs towards her and spoke of her approvingly as "sweet and gentle."

Francis Manning, the first of the two men to make a declaration of love, was a big giant of a man with a handsome face, an amiable disposition, and a supreme concern for his own well-being. He had reached the age and position when it seemed desirable to marry, and, that being the case, there was no doubt upon whom his choice would fall.

For years past Lilith Wastneys had stood to Francis as a type of all that was sweet and desirable in women. In his eyes she was beautiful, though in reality she had no claim to the title. The love-light in his eyes transformed her pale locks into gold, her colourless eyes into deepest blue; her height was to him "just as high as my heart"; her low voice, her drooping lids, her noiseless movements—each and all appeared to him the perfection of their kind.

Francis was whole-heartedly in love, but it was not in his nature to be otherwise than leisurely. While a more impetuous lover would have hastened to put his fate to the test, he was content to continue the even tenor of his way, indulge in confident dreams of the future, and leave it to fate to decide the moment of avowal. Nothing on earth was

farther from his suspicions than the fact that it was Lilith herself, who, in the ultimate moment, played the part of fate.

She wore a white dress. Lilith invariably wore white in the evening,—simple, little white satin frocks devoid of ornament, save for a soft swathing of tulle, from which her shoulders arose, fair and rounded. Whatever might be the fashion of the day, that soft swathe of tulle was in its place; however puffed and waved might be the coiffure of the other women in the room, Lilith's flaxen locks were always smooth and demure. There was a distinction in such simplicity. People looked at her and questioned. They watched her with puzzled eyes. Was she pretty? Certainly not pretty. Did they admire her? They were not at all sure that they did. *But there was something about her!*

It was Lilith who led the way into the palm-shaded retreat, and chose the most secluded corner. She and Francis were engaged to dance the next number together, but she pleaded fatigue, and they sat alone in the dimness.

"Who was that dissipated-looking fellow who took you in to supper? I wanted to take you myself, but he was too quick for me. Rather a striking-looking head, if he were not such a terrible waster!"

"His name is Lowther."

Francis straightened himself, startled into vivid attention.

"*Lowther!* Hereward Lowther—*that's* how I knew his face! I've seen it in caricatures. The idea of meeting Lowther here! I should not have thought dances were in his line."

"He does not dance."

"Then why on earth does he trouble to come?"

Lilith did not answer. She knew; but had no intention of sharing her knowledge, and Francis was too much engrossed in his own reflections to pursue the question.

"So that is Lowther! Good heavens, how excited I should have been two or three years ago at the idea of meeting him in the same room! Sad how that man has fizzled out! He promised such big things, bigger things than any other man of his day. I've heard him singled out a score of times as the man who was going to save England, and now"—he shrugged, and flicked his large fingers—"it's all over; nothing left but the wreck of a man. Drugs, they say. Something of the sort evidently; he carries it in his face. Not the sort of man for you to have anything to do with, little girl!"

Francis's voice dropped to a tender note as he spoke the last words, and Lilith lifted her heavy

lids and smiled at him with gentle sweetness. It was seldom that he had obtained more than a glimpse of those downcast eyes, but now they met his and held them in a lingering look which sent the blood racing through his veins. Suddenly, imperatively, the patience of years was broken, and hot words flowed from his lips. He loved her; she was the sweetest, the dearest of women. For years he had loved her; he would love her all his life; would live only to serve her. It was his own feelings on which he enlarged; his own feelings, which were obviously of the first importance. In his ardour there was no hint of anxiety. He was in love, but confidently in love. He had but to speak, and she would come fluttering to his arms.

But he wooed her well, denying her no tittle of her woman's kingdom. He held her hands in his, and his big voice softened tenderly as he made his vows.

"I will take care of you,—such care as was never taken of a woman before! You are not fit to stand alone; you are too gentle and fragile. You want a big fellow like me to stand between you and the world. It shall be my work in life to shield you, and keep you sheltered and safe. Only trust yourself to me, and you will see. You *will* trust yourself, won't you, darling? I'm not rich, but we

should be comfortable enough. You are not the sort of girl to be ambitious, and, you *do* love me, Lilith!"

Lilith smiled, but she left her hand in his, and a tinge of colour showed in the pale cheeks.

"I think I *do* love you, Francis!" she said slowly.

Francis pressed her hand in acknowledgment. Unbroken confidence had deprived him of the great thrill which comes to most men at the knowledge that they are beloved; but one cannot have everything in this world, and if the choice had been his, he would unhesitatingly have plumped for the greater ease. He pressed her hand, and bent over her tenderly.

"My darling girl! You make me very happy. You shall never regret it, I'll promise you that. . . . Look at your little mite of a hand lying in mine! . . . I could crush it to pieces with one clutch from my big paw. They are a type of the difference between us—those two hands—I so big, and strong, and you such a little slip of a weak, helpless thing."

Lilith bent her head on one side, and looked down with a smile. She lifted her tiny fingers and softly stroked the giant hand.

"Why do you love me, Francis?"

"Because I can't help it!" returned Francis

promptly. "Good heavens, Lilith, if you knew how thankful a fellow is to meet a good old-fashioned girl! I'm fed up with these modern specimens, who set themselves up to be equal with men, and push and drive to force themselves to the front, instead of being content with the place which Nature has given them. I couldn't stick a modern woman. I want a wife who will let me judge for her, and be thankful to have my protection—like you, you little darling! You are everything that a woman ought to be. . . . And why do you love me?"

"Because you are so big, and so handsome, and so"—Lilith laughed, a tinkling, girlish laugh, which took the sting from the word—"*stupid!*" She bent nearer to him, with a caressing gesture, and Francis slipped his arm round her waist, and laughed in sympathy. The dear, wee mite! What nonsense she did talk!

"I don't care what is your reason, so long as you *do* love me. And how soon will you be ready to marry your stupid man?"

"Do people always marry the people they love?" Lilith asked innocently; and Francis said they did; of course they did. What else was there for them to do?

He remembered afterwards that though the

conversation which followed was entirely agreeable to his feelings, Lilith had persistently avoided a definite promise.

The next morning a letter was handed in at the door of his chambers. It was in Lilith's writing, and ran as follows:

"DEAR FRANCIS,—

"I want you to know that I am engaged to be married to Hereward Lowther. He asked me last night, just after you, and I said 'Yes.' Thank you so much for all your kindness. It would have been very nice, but I feel sure that we should not have suited.

"Yours affectionately,

"LILITH WASTNEYS."

. . . . . .

The engagement of Hereward Lowther caused some excitement in the political world, across which he had made so meteoric a flight. Of no one of the younger men in the House had so much been hoped. His first speech was still quoted as the most brilliant effort of the kind within the memory of the present generation, while his tact and his charm had seemed little inferior to his ability. Poor, brilliant, unhappy Lowther, his was but another name added to the list of the men

of genius who have been their own worst enemies! So rapid had been his downfall, so flagrant his avoidance of duty, that his friends were convinced that his constituency would not return him a second time.

And now, with the shock of the unexpected, came the news of his matrimonial engagement. The chorus of disapproval was loud, but the Chief frowned thoughtfully, and reserved his opinion.

"If she is the right woman, it may be the saving of him yet. Who is she? Does anyone know?"

"Her name is Wastneys; daughter of a country squire down in Cornwall. Good enough family, so far as that goes."

"And the girl herself?"

"Oh, a doll! Insignificant creature, with washed-out colouring. Not even good looking. Heavy and dull; not a word to say."

The Chief sighed.

"That," he said slowly, "is the end of Lowther! The man is doomed."

During the weeks of the honeymoon Hereward Lowther's thoughts were exercised with a problem which, it is to be hoped, presents no difficulty to the average bridegroom.

"Why had he married his wife?"

During the few months which had elapsed since his introduction to Lilith Wastneys, Lowther had been conscious of a reluctant admiration, which was strangely akin to antipathy. There had been occasions when he had definitely decided that he disliked the girl, yet the decision had no mitigating effect on his desire to see her again at the earliest possible moment. But he was certain, looking back over the time from the first meeting on the golf links, to that last evening in the palm-shaded retreat at the ball, he was definitely, absolutely, certain that the idea of marriage had never entered his head.

How, then, had he become engaged? How had it happened that he left that ball pledged to live side by side with this strange, silent girl, till death did them part? Honestly, Hereward did not know. There had been a flirtation, of course, if such a demure, well-conducted affair could be called a flirtation. The girl had looked unusually feminine and attractive in the dim light, and, this was the crux!—*she had seemed to expect it.* Some power of expectancy had driven him on until he had spoken the fateful words, for in these days of languor and depression, Lowther had lost the power of resistance, and the easiest course seemed

invariably the best. He was conscious of his own demoralization, but the misery of the consciousness had no vivifying effect; it rather drove him back to his drugs. So in this instance he had drifted on, and in a moment's weakness had sacrificed his freedom.

Yes! that was what it came to; that was the disgraceful fact. He had married this girl because she had desired it, and he was too lazy to resist. Lowther acknowledged the fact with a shrug, but immediately afterwards arose a second problem, hardly less incomprehensible than the first.

Why had Lilith married him?

She did not love him. The man had soon recognized that fact, and it had brought an unexpected stab of pain. If she had loved him, as some women can love, she might have—helped! But she was cold as ice. Even his own lukewarm endearments had proved unacceptable; there was evidently no personal attraction to explain the mystery of her marriage with a man who was an historic failure.

They had been married a week, and were sitting in the garden of a foreign hotel, discussing a possible excursion, when Lilith startled her husband by a sudden question. Her voice, as she spoke,

was low and unperturbed; her face showed a gentle smile, nevertheless that question smote upon Lowther's ears like the crack of a whip.

"At what time," asked Lilith calmly, "do you next take your morphia?"

He turned upon her, furious, ashamed, stammering the inevitable pitiful denial.

"Wh-at do you mean? Morphia—I! Who says I take morphia?"

"Everybody says it. Everybody knows. Don't distress yourself, Hereward. I only wished to know your hours. It is better, isn't it, that we should plan our expeditions for the times when you are most—most——"

"Most *what?*"

"Normal! The morphia naturally is soothing, but while it is working would it not be better if you were—alone?"

"You are talking nonsense. You don't know what you are talking about. If you understood anything about the working of morphia, you would realize that after a dose one feels stimulated, refreshed. I am never so well as immediately after——"

"I'm sorry. I am ignorant, as you say. Then we had better start our excursion immediately after an injection. That is, if we can manage

to do it in the time. How long is it before the—er—other stage comes on?"

"*What* other stage?"

"The—drunken stage!" Lilith answered.

He hated her at that moment. A fury of anger rushed through his veins. He leaped from his seat and paced the path with impetuous steps. With the cane in his hand he smote fiercely at the encircling shrubs. All the lethargy of the past months disappeared; he was alive again, smartingly alive, face to face with his shame.

"Who dares to say that I am drunk? It is a lie! When have you seen me drunk?"

"Should I have said 'drugged'? I'm sorry. I'm so ignorant, you see. I didn't know. Of course, if you say so, there *is* a difference."

He swung away from her, and entering the hotel mounted the stairs to his own room. In his present condition of mind he dared not—literally dared not—trust himself within sight of his fellows. Up and down the quiet room he paced, like a wild animal in its cage, his mind seething with rage and indignation against his wife, against the world, against himself. It was as though a bandage had fallen, and his sleep-ridden eyes were suddenly galvanized into life. He looked back along the sloping path and perceived how far he had fallen. . . .

It was nearing the time for his next injection. Automatically he took the tabloids from the bottle, and carried them across the room to dissolve them in a glass of water. As he did so, he passed the window and caught sight of his wife's figure seated in the same position as that in which he had left her ten minutes before. How young she looked! Almost a child in her simple white frock. The sun shone down on her flaxen locks, on one tiny hand extended on the seat by her side. Something gripped at the man's heart at the sight of that hand; it looked so small, so helpless, so appealing. The poor girl! *On her honeymoon!* What a bitter disillusionment must be hers! With a sudden sweeping movement his hand flew outward, and the tabloids hurled through the air and buried themselves in the grass below. The next moment Lowther himself descended to the garden, and seated himself by his wife's side.

"Lilith," he said humbly, "I'm sorry! I was a beast to speak to you as I did, but you know a man doesn't like interference. Forgive me, like a good girl, and—I'll tell you something in return! It *was* time for my morphia, but I've not taken it. I'm going out with you instead. . . . Shall we start?"

She lifted her eyes and looked at him. It

seemed to him that he looked upon a new woman. Her eyes were no longer light, but dark and shining. They were bent upon him with an expression which sent the blood rushing through his veins. There was triumph in that look, and an immense, unutterable relief, but there was tenderness also, the tenderness of a mother towards a struggling child.

The remembrance of that look remained with Lowther and helped him through the inevitable discomforts of the next hours. Lilith spoke but little; he was thankful to her for her silence, but once and again when his restlessness grew acute, she slipped her hand through his arm and pushed it forward, so that her fingers clasped his wrist. The little hand was warm to the touch. It was as though some vital force passed from her veins to his, calming, invigorating.

. . . . . .

Only once did Lilith touch on the subject of politics. She asked her husband what was likely to be the predominant question of the next session. He told her that it would be the Land Bill, long deferred, but inevitable: a Bill on which the House was sharply divided, which would call forth a heat of argument. He answered curtly, with an evident distaste, and she never renewed the subject. Lowther thanked Providence for a wife with tact.

They roamed about, from one country to another—Belgium, Holland, France, Germany, Italy, the Tyrol, taking by preference untrodden paths, putting up at quiet country inns, enjoying the study of peasant life. Lilith declared that she was tired of cities, had seen enough show places to last her life; now she needed a rest. How badly Lowther himself had needed a rest was proved by his altered appearance after a few weeks of a leisurely life passed in fresh, pure air. Never again had the subject of morphia been mentioned between himself and his wife, but the doses were steadily diminishing. There had been one whole day when he had taken no injection at all! He wondered at the coincidence which had made Lilith so tender on that day! If it had not been for her tenderness, for the clasp of that small, warm hand, he doubted if he could have lasted out. He was no longer so sure that he did not love his wife. He was grateful to her for her tact and forbearance. He was beginning to look forward to her rare tenderness; as a reward for which it were worth while to endure.

Both Lowther and his wife were clever linguists, and he was amused to discover that, quiet as was her nature, she possessed the rare gift of making friends with the humble folk of the different coun-

tries through which they passed, and of drawing forth their confidence. Many an evening was spent in conversation with "mine host" as he enjoyed his leisurely smoke at the end of the day's work, and "mine host" was an interesting talker, with his tales of the country side, from the lordly baron in his rock-bound castle, to the humblest tenant upon his land. Many talks were held also during the day-time, with the labourers in the fields, with the farmers who supplied milk and bread, and who beamed in appreciation of the largesse bestowed by the English milord and his wife. There were charming stories to be told—stories of affection and kindliness between the tenants and the lord of the soil, of a simple, feudal loyalty which sounded like a page from a fairy-tale of old· but there were tragedies also—stories of injustice and tyranny, of suffering and want. They were simple people, and they told their tales simply and well, delivering themselves in conclusion, of a pathetic apology. "It was a pity. . . . Things were not as bad as they had been. In England, of course, it was different. The peasants in England had no such trials to endure!"

Lilith sat listening while her husband explained that England had her own land troubles. Her

sleepy eyes expressed but little interest; but now and again she would put a searching question which cut to the very heart of the matter, and set him talking afresh. Wherever they went the same subject recurred, and fresh differences were discussed; but these conversations were but incidents in the day's doings. From private conversation politics were banished.

At the end of the honeymoon Mr. and Mrs. Hereward Lowther returned to town and took up their abode in a small flat in Westminster. The choice was made by Lilith, as indeed was every choice in those days of Lowther's weakness. She confessed to an affection for Westminster, for the quaint, old-fashioned nooks and corners which still remain, tucked behind the busy thoroughfares; for the picturesque precincts of the Abbey. Westminster was at once central, convenient, and old-world. She was eloquent on the subject of its advantages as a dwelling-place, but she never alluded to the vicinity of St. Stephen's.

After his return to town Lowther passed through a somewhat severe relapse. Face to face with the old conditions he grew nervous and despondent, and had more frequent recourse to his drug, but there was this great difference between his present

condition and the past, that whereas he had been indifferent, now he was penitent, remorseful, utterly ashamed. Lilith never reproached him for his lapses, she nursed him assiduously through the subsequent weakness; she checked him when he would have made faltering apologies.

"We won't talk about it. It is not worth while. It will pass!" she said quietly, and as she spoke, her strange, expressionless eyes gazed into his, and he found himself murmuring in agreement. "Yes, it will pass!" Never once, so far as he could discover, did any doubt concerning the future enter his wife's head. She must certainly have heard that when a man takes to drugs it is almost a miracle if he is enabled to break the habit, yet her confidence remained unshaken. Throughout the darkest day, throughout the bitterest disappointment, she remained serenely unmoved. Always, in speaking of the future, she envisaged Lowther as strong, confident, successful, until by degrees the image printed itself on his own brain, and the old distrust began to disappear.

The House opened, a week passed by, and Lowther made no sign of taking his seat. Lilith remained silent; it seemed the result of accident that engagements lessened more and more, so that he found himself unoccupied, sitting in the little

flat, listening to the chimes of Big Ben, following in imagination the doings within the Second Chamber, while hour by hour, day by day, a mysterious power seemed forcing him onward, urging him to arouse himself from his stupor, and go forth once more into the arena.

One evening husband and wife sat alone together in the little drawing-room of the flat. Lowther was smoking, and making a pretence of reading a review, Lilith sat by the open window, her hands folded on her lap. She had none of the nervous, fidgety movements to which most women are subject in moments of idleness, but could remain motionless as a statue for half an hour on end, her lids drooped over her quiet eyes. It was no interruption on his wife's part which caused Lowther's increasing restlessness; even when the book was thrown down, and he took to pacing hurriedly up and down, she remained passive and immovable.

Suddenly Lowther drew up by her side, laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Lilith! I'm going. . . To the House. Would you come? I think it would help me if you would come too."

It was the first time that he had acknowledged in words the mysterious truth that in his wife's

presence he felt stronger, freer from temptation. His hand lingered on her shoulder with a caressing touch, and Lilith turned her head so that for a fleeting moment her cheek rested against his fingers. Her assent was a matter of course; she wasted no breath on that, but, as she rose to her feet, she spoke a few words, which to Lowther's bruised spirit, were as water to a fainting man:

"I am so *proud* of you, Hereward!"

. . . . . .

The session had begun, and the Land Bill was occupying the attention of the House. The two leaders had delivered themselves of strong opposing speeches, and the Bill was open for discussion. One member after another rose from the crowded benches. A few of the number spoke well and to the point, and were acclaimed with applause; but the greater number repeated old arguments, and failed to throw fresh light on the vexed problem. The House listened with resigned impatience.

In a corner of the Ladies' Gallery sat a small figure with an aureole of flaxen hair. She leaned forward on her seat, her hands clasped together, her eyes fixed in a deep, unblinking gaze at a man on the opposite benches. He was a striking-looking man, still young, yet with an air of delicacy and strain. An onlooker observing him at

this moment would have noticed that from time to time he stirred uneasily, and cast a glance upwards at the grille of the Ladies' Gallery. As each speaker in succession finished his speech and sat down, this man stirred more forcibly, as though combating an impulse which increased in violence, and eventually he was on his feet; had caught the Speaker's eyes.

There was a momentary silence throughout the House. *Lowther!* How long was it, how many years since Lowther had essayed a speech? What had happened to spur him to such an effort? This was his first appearance since the beginning of the session, and though he was obviously improved in health he had avoided private conversation, and kept shrinkingly to himself. And now—a speech! With characteristic loyalty to a man who has done good work in past days, the House prayed that Lowther knew what he was about, and was not going to make an exhibition of himself.

But now he was speaking, and the old charm was at work. The members listened with surprise to the old well-turned sentences, the old masterly style; felt again the charm of the old ingenuous manner. And he was speaking to the point, with an expert's width of knowledge which held the

House. "On this point of tenure might it not be well to take a hint from Italy? . . . In Italy, etc., etc." "In Holland there was a special exemption which was worthy of note . . . " "In the province of Lombardy the tenants retained the right . . ." The land problems of Europe seemed at his finger-ends; he handled them not as a politician informed by dry, written statements, but as living things, seen through living eyes. He had apt illustrations to present with the readiness of first-hand knowledge; he had, as a sum total, one illuminating suggestion, and the House cheered him with a ringing cheer.

That cheer sounded in Lowther's ears like the opening of a great gate, a gate which his own hands had closed. Through its portals he beheld once more the castles of his dreams, and took heart to walk forward.

Lilith greeted him with a smile of congratulation, but the drive home was accomplished in silence. It was late when they arrived at their modest flat. The servants had retired to bed, leaving a table of refreshments drawn up before the drawing-room fire. Lilith took off her cloak and sat down, but Lowther went straight to his own room. A few minutes later he returned, and, closing the door behind him, stood silently behind her chair. She

could hear the quick intake of his breath, but she waited motionless until he should speak.

At last it came.

"Lilith! I have something I want to give you. Something for you—to keep! Put out your hand."

Still silent, still with eyes averted, she held out her hand towards him. Something cold clicked against the palm, something long and thin. She opened her fingers, and beheld a morphia syringe.

"I—I shan't need it any more," stammered the voice. A hand, Lowther's hand, came over her shoulder, mutely making appeal. Lilith dropped the syringe, and caught the hand to her breast.

The next minute he was kneeling at her feet, and the two were gazing deep into each other's eyes.

"Lilith," cried Lowther brokenly, "it—it will be hard. . . I shall have a hard fight. Do you think you could *love* me a little, Lilith?"

"I must love you," answered Lilith deeply, "a great deal, or it will be no use!"

It was five years later when the Opposition came into power, and it surprised nobody when Hereward Lowther was given a seat in the Cabinet. During those five years husband and wife had lived quietly in their little flat, going but little into society, affecting few of the amusements of the day.

When Parliament was sitting, Lilith was a constant visitor to the Ladies' Gallery, and it was noted that her husband never spoke when she was absent. In holiday time her chief interest lay in the study of the problems of modern life; but, as on that first tour abroad, she studied first-hand, and not through the medium of books. Lowther felt it an extraordinary coincidence that her inquiries so often proved of value to himself, and always, under every circumstance, Lilith's immovable serenity was as a rock, against which his weaker, more excitable nature found support. Lowther questioned himself sometimes as to the explanation of his wife's unshaken calm, and came to the conclusion that it sprang from a certain obtuseness or stupidity of brain, but he smiled as he mentally voiced the thought, and his smile was tender. He loved his wife; she was a dear girl, tactful, unassuming. He was thankful that she was not clever.

Five years spread a kindly veil over the public memory, and there were few people who troubled to recall Lowther's temporary lapse. That was an affair of the past. What mattered now was that he was one of the most brilliant and valuable men in the House, and that the country needed his services. As a politician he was able and statesmanlike, but he was a politician second and a

patriot first. The glory of office counted for nothing with him in comparison with the glory of his native land, and the country recognized his honesty and loved him for it. He was a member of the Cabinet now, but as certainly as he lived he would be Prime Minister another day. As he walked through the streets the people pointed him out to each other.

"That's Lowther. Our best man. He'll be Prime Minister before he's done. The sooner the better. A straight, fair man. The man we want. What a position for a man to gain by sheer personal force —the virtual ruler over a fifth part of the world! What power, my dear fellow—what power!"

"You may say so, indeed; extraordinary power!"

VI

THE MAN WHO WISHED FOR COMFORT

IT seemed hard to Francis Manning that he, who had asked of fate nothing more exorbitant than an easy, comfortable existence, should have been called on to endure one of the most uncomfortable of experiences—that of being jilted by the girl to whom he had believed himself engaged to be married! For years past he had intended to marry Lilith Wastneys, and when he told his love she had been everything that was sweet and complaisant, had said, in so many words, that she loved him in return. He had gone home feeling the happiest man in the world, had lain awake for a solid hour by the clock, rejoicing in his happiness, and the very next morning, behold a letter to tell him that she was engaged to another man!

Francis could not endure to recall the shock, the misery, the discomfort, of that hour. If the news had come from another source he would have refused to believe it; but it was Lilith

herself who wrote, so there was no loophole of escape.

During the following days he felt stunned and wretched. His heart was wounded, but he was not sentimental by nature, and it seemed to him that he could have schooled his heart into subjection if it had not been for—for the other things! There did not seem a single interest in life which this wretched disillusionment had left untouched. To begin with, there was his work. He had worked for a home in which Lilith should live as his wife. Work seemed suddenly dull and purposeless now that the proposed home had crumbled into ruins. Then, as regards amusement—he had grown into the habit of arranging his engagements to fit in with Lilith's own. A dinner meant the chance of Lilith for a partner; a ball, a dance or two with Lilith, and a *tête-à-tête* in a conservatory; a reception, the chance of edging his way towards a little white figure and keeping beside it for the rest of the evening. Amusement lost its savour, now that Lilith no more entered into the scheme. Life was dull, stale, and unprofitable. The days dragged past on leaden feet; he fell asleep with a sigh, and woke to a pang of remembrance.

For a whole month Francis was a prey to grief, and then, as he himself would have expressed it,

he "bucked up." There came an historic Saturday evening, when, in the company of a particularly fine cigar he came to the conclusion that "it was not good enough," and that he could not "stick" it any more. He had had a whole month of being miserable, and it was the dullest time he had ever known! In self-defence he must pull himself together and face the music.

It was astonishing how many saws Francis quoted over that cigar; but he was as good as his vow, and from that hour he wasted no more regrets on Lilith Wastneys. So serene and cheerful became his demeanour that his one confidante congratulated him on having set a pattern to suffering mankind.

"I have heard many tragic stories. People always do confide in me," she told him; "but *never* have I met a man who has borne his trouble as you have borne yours. I feel a better woman from the experience. It has been a triumph of bravery and endurance!"

"Think so?" said Francis. He was gratified to know that he had made such a good impression, and reminded himself insistently that lookers-on saw most of the game. He did this to quieten a tiresome inner voice which insisted that his cheerful mien was the result of cowardice rather

than of bravery, the cowardice which refused to endure!

"Still, you know," he declared lugubriously, "a fellow feels lonely——"

The confidante sighed, and flicked her light eyelashes.

"I know the feeling," she said.

When a man has made up his mind that it is time to marry, it is foolish to abandon the plan because one woman out of the teeming millions in the land refuses to become his wife. This, at least, was Francis Manning's seasoned decision, and it was emphasized by the announcement of Lilith Wastney's wedding, which appeared in the newspapers exactly three months after her refusal of himself. Whatever sentimental hankerings he might have cherished for Lilith the maid, it was clearly out of place to cast another thought towards the wife of Hereward Lowther. Francis had a deep respect for the conventions, and death itself could not have removed his former love to a more impassable distance. He heaved a sigh to her memory, and buried it underground.

Within a week from that day he was engaged to the confidante. It seemed the obvious thing to do, for he knew her more intimately than any other girl of his acquaintance, and owed her a debt of grati-

tude for her sympathy in his former affair. She was quite a nice girl, too; not pretty, but amiable and healthy, with a small income of her own which would come in usefully towards running the house. He wished her eyelashes had not been quite so white; but one could not have everything. She was a nice, affectionate girl.

The confidante accepted Francis because she was tired of living at home with a managing mamma, and wanted to start life on her own account. She liked Francis, was proud of his fine appearance, knew him to be good-tempered and honourable, and was complacently assured that they would "get on." Far better, she said, to begin with a sensible, open-eyed liking, than a headlong passion which would wear itself out before the honeymoon was over. It was, in short, a sensible marriage between eminently sensible contracting parties. The little God of Love had no part in the ceremony, but it is only fair to mention that nobody missed him.

Mr. and Mrs. Manning went to Scotland for their honeymoon, and Francis played golf every day, what time his wife read novels in the veranda of the hotel. She sped him on his way with a smile, and welcomed him back with a smile to match, and if the young girls in the hotel confided in each

other that *they* would break their hearts if *their* bridegrooms neglected them in such a fashion, such a thought never entered her head. She would have been bored if Francis had stayed beside her all day long. What on earth could they have found to say?

At the end of a fortnight Mr. and Mrs. Manning returned to a semi-detached villa in a southern suburb, and settled down to a comfortable married life.

. . . . . .

Mr. and Mrs. Francis Manning spent the next ten years in peace and comfort, and humdrum happiness. They had good health, easy means, a large number of acquaintances, and three little daughters. The daughters were plain, but sturdy, and gave a minimum of trouble in the household. Francis, indeed, insisted on this point. Early in the lifetime of Maud, the eldest daughter, he had become aware of the amazing fact that nurses occasionally wished to "go out"; that, in addition, they wished to go out on the Sabbath day. This seemed to him unreasonable, and he said as much to his wife.

"But why in the name of all that's ridiculous, *Sunday?* I'm at home on Sunday. Sunday's the day when we need nurse most of all. It's my holiday."

Mrs. Manning represented that Sunday was also a holiday for nurse and her friends, and Francis said, very well, then, they must have *two* nurses. If necessary they must have three. The one thing certain was that he could not be disturbed on his day of rest, so a capable assistant was engaged forthwith, and comfort was re-established.

The Mannings took no part in the intellectual life of the neighbourhood. There were several book clubs, lecture courses, and the like, which they were urged to join, but without success. Francis declared that he worked all day, and came home to rest, and his wife said, thank you, no; she had no wish to go back to school at her age. They went out to dinner now and then, and made a point of giving two or three dinners themselves every winter. They provided lavishly on such occasions, and were agreeably conscious that their guests were impressed. Both husband and wife enjoyed rich foods, and saw no reason for denying themselves the gratification.

As far as religion was concerned, the Mannings made a point of going to church with the children every Sunday morning when it was fine, or they were not late for breakfast, or Francis did not feel inclined for a walk. Sometimes he went off

golfing for the day, and then Mrs. Manning dressed Maud in her best clothes and they went to church together. She had been brought up to go to church, and thought the habit "nice." Besides it was pleasant to see friends coming out, and walk home with Mrs. Lane, her favourite neighbour. They would meet on the path outside the graveyard, and turn uphill together, and Mrs. Lane would say: "*What* a sermon! My dear, *did* you see the woman in the pew before ours? She came in late, just before the psalms. She took off her coat, *and*, my dear, her blouse——"

She would proceed to describe the blouse in detail, and Mrs. Manning would sigh and say: "It *is* nice to have something interesting to look at in the next pew! We have those awful Miss Newtes."

The neighbours on both sides envied the Francis Mannings, and quoted their doings with admiration. In the matter of holidays, for instance, how sane and sensible were their arrangements! The children were sent with their nurses to the sea, the father enjoyed himself on Scottish golf links; the mother toured abroad with a woman friend. Each autumn the neighbours agreed to profit by the example of the Francis Mannings, and to do likewise the next summer; but somehow it

never came off. When spring came round the wife would conscientiously remind her husband of the resolve, and urge him to keep it, while gracefully withdrawing herself. "Margot has had several of those bad chest colds," she would explain. "I should be so anxious in case she caught a chill. It really is my duty to go with the children but *you*, dear, you could quite well——"

"Well! I don't know," the husband would reply. "What would become of you in the evenings? And I promised to teach Jack to swim. I think, on the whole, we'd better stick to the old arrangement this summer."

So once more they would depart *en famille* to the seaside, and stay in lodgings, and be happy in the old domesticated fashion. But also, quite frequently, bored!

On the rare occasions when he gave himself over to thought, Francis realized that there was only one respect in which life had disappointed him, only one desire which had been withheld. He wanted a son. Each time that a child had been expected he had built his hopes upon a son; each time disappointment had been more acute. He had built up a good business by his own exertions; he wanted a son of his own name to carry it on. There were times, moreover, when the purely

feminine nature of his household fretted his nerves, and he thought, with longing, of a man child; a little chappie in trousers, instead of the eternal flounces; a knickerbockered elf sitting in his dressing-room watching him shave; a tall hobbledehoy beginning to play golf, listening with interest to accounts of his father's prowess. Later on, a man, a partner, a prop for declining years. Francis pushed the thought from him, but it recurred. Deep at his heart lay the longing for a son.

And the son came. This time he had not hoped; he had told himself steadily that it would be a girl. Better if it were a girl. No use having a boy at the end of a family of girls. He would grow up half a girl himself, and be a disappointment. He was placidly resigned to girl, and after all, behold, it was a boy! The blood raced through his veins as he heard the good news; something astonishingly like tears pricked at his eyes.

"Is he—is he *all right?*" he asked breathlessly, and the doctor laughed.

"Go upstairs and look at him, my dear fellow! Fine little chap as you could wish to see."

In truth he was a healthy nine-pounder of a son, guaranteed by nurse and mother to be the finest baby ever born, and seated by his wife's bedside, Francis gave vent to his jubilation.

"Now," he said triumphantly, "I have everything I want. I really am a lucky fellow. Jolly little beggar, eh? Seems to me—I don't know if I'm right—but I do think he looks different from the rest!"

The wife smiled, but Francis was right; everybody said he was right. The longed-for boy was in truth an extraordinarily comely infant, and each week of his life he blossomed into fuller charm. His well-shaped head was covered with golden curls and when he lay asleep (and he obligingly slept most of his time) it was a pleasure to observe the delicate promise of his features. He had obviously elected to resemble his handsome father, and the father was complacently grateful for the fact.

Mrs. Manning observed with amazement that Francis nursed this baby, positively nursed him in his arms, and was quite disappointed when, on returning from the city, he failed to find him awake.

"Are his eyes changing colour yet?" he would ask. "I want them to be blue. Blue eyes would look so well with his yellow hair." But the baby's eyes remained a dull, clouded grey. "Not blue yet!" Francis would repeat. "How long is it before they begin to change? Fine big eyes, aren't they? I want to make the little beggar look

at me, but he won't. Why does he stare at the ceiling?"

"It's the electric light," said his wife; but the next morning, when the lights were turned off, the baby still stared blankly upward.

"Why the dickens does he stare at the ceiling?" Francis asked again.

Gradually, imperceptibly, a growing anxiety began to mingle with his joy, and the anxiety was connected with those staring eyes. He would not put his thoughts into words; but he watched his wife's face, and saw in it no reflection of his own fears. Then for a time he would banish the dread; and anon it would recur.

Were the boy's eyes all right? Was it really natural that he should be always staring up? Ridiculous nonsense! Of *course* it was all right. Things had come to a pretty pass when he took to worrying himself, while his wife, who knew a thousand times more about babies, remained untroubled and serene. Bother the child's eyes! . . . He would think about them no more.

All his life Francis had been a sworn opponent of worry. When anything disagreeable threatened, his mode of procedure was to shrug his shoulders, and immediately divert his thoughts. "Leave the thing alone; don't bother about it; it will probably

come all right in the end!" Such was his theory, and experience had proved that as often as not it was correct. He endeavoured to cultivate the same attitude towards his boy, but in vain. The anxiety recurred.

He told himself that he would have the eyes tested, and satisfy himself once for all; but once and again his courage failed, and the days passed on, and nothing was done. Then there came an evening when suddenly fear engulfed him, and made anything seem easier than a continuation of suspense.

He was holding the child in his arms, and he rose and carried it across the room, to where a powerful light hung from the wall. He pushed aside the shade, and held the tiny face closely approaching the glass. The eyes stared on, unblinking and still. A great cry burst from Francis' throat:

"My God!" he cried. "The boy is blind!"

. . . . . .

The boy was blind, and there was no hope that he would ever possess his sight. Mrs. Manning wept herself ill, but even in the depths of her distress she realized that her husband's sufferings were keener than her own. It gave an added touch of misery to those black days, to feel a strange new

distance between her husband and herself. She could not comfort him; she could not understand him; after ten years of married life it appeared as if the man she had known had disappeared, and a stranger had taken his place. Yet there was nothing unmanly in his grief; he was quiet and self-restrained as she had never seen him before, gentler, and more considerate of others.

The poor woman noticed the change with awe, and wondered if Francis were going to die.

"I have never seen you feel anything as you are feeling this," she said to him one night. They were sitting by the dying fire, and Francis raised his head and stared at her with sombre eyes.

"But I have felt nothing," he said flatly. "I am finding that out. I did not know what it meant to feel! . . . "

. . . . . .

From the moment of his discovery of the blindness of his son, Francis Manning became a man possessed of but one aim—to lighten and alleviate, so far as was humanly possible, the child's sad lot. He taught himself Braille, so that in time to come he might teach it to the boy, and be able to translate for his benefit appropriate pieces of literature. He visited every famous institute for the blind at home and abroad, and made an ex-

haustive study of their systems. He searched for a girl of intelligence and charm, and sent her to be trained in readiness to undertake the boy's education; he schooled himself to be a playmate and companion; he denied himself every luxury, so that the boy's future might be assured. As Francis the man, he ceased to exist; he lived on only as Francis the father.

During the first three years of his life the young Francis remained blissfully unconscious of his infirmity. A strong, healthy child surrounded by the tenderest of care, the sun of his happiness never set. His little feet raced up and down; his sweet, shrill voice chanted merry strains; his small, strong hands seemed gifted with sight as well as touch, so surely did they guide him to and fro. Nature, having withheld the greatest gift, had remorsefully essayed compensation in the shape of a finer touch, a finer hearing. The blind child was the sunshine of the home; but the father knew that the hour must dawn when that sunshine would be clouded. He held himself in readiness for that hour, training himself as an athlete trains for a race.

He would need courage: therefore it behoved him to be brave now, to harden himself against the ills of life, and cultivate a resolute composure. All

the influences which had tended to keep him soft must be thrown aside as weights which would hinder the race. He must be wise, therefore it behoved him to think, and to train his mind. A light reason, a light excuse, would no longer be sufficient; he must learn to judge and to reflect. He must be tender; and to be tender it was necessary to bury self, and to put other interests before his own. More weights had to be thrown aside. And he must be patient! Hitherto he had considered patience a feeble, almost unmanly, virtue; but he perceived that it would be needed, and must be cultivated with the rest.

Mrs. Manning confided in her neighbours that Francis had never been the same since the discovery of Baby's blindness. He never complained, she said. Oh, no; and he was most kind—gave no trouble in the house, *but*— Then she sighed, and the neighbours sympathized, and prophesied that he would "come round." In truth the good, commonplace woman was ill at ease in the rarefied atmosphere of the home, and sincerely regretted the comfortable, easy-going husband of yore.

For three whole years Frank lived untroubled, and then the questions began to come.

"Am I blind, father? Why am I blind? Is it naughty to be blind?"

The baby child was easily appeased. Later on the questions would become more insistent. Francis prepared himself for that hour. At four years fleeting shadows began to pass over the boy's radiance. Alone with his father, his face would pucker in thought.

"Shall I always be blind, father? I don't like to be blind. Was you blind when you was a little boy?"

The knife turned in the father's heart at the sound of the innocent words; but always the cloud loomed darker ahead. He trained himself more zealously, in preparation for the hour when the boy would rebel!

But there were happy hours between, hours when the natural joy of childhood filled the house with laughter, and father and son were supremely happy in each other's society. No companion of his own age was half as dear to the boy; no living creature stood for so much in the father's heart. They read and studied together; they held long, intimate conversation. They played games from which blind people are usually debarred. Standing behind a hoop on the croquet lawn the father would cry in a brisk, staccato voice, "Frank!" and on the instant the boy's mallet would hit the ball, and send it in the direction indicated, and

proud and glad was Frankie to know that his aim was surer than that of his sighted sisters. And every hour of contentment, every added interest and occupation bestowed upon the boy, was as a salve to the sore father heart. But at six years the inevitable rebellion began.

"Is he blind?" the boy would ask of a new acquaintance. "Can *he* see, too? *Everyone* can see but me! . . . *I* want to run about like the other fellows, and play cricket, and have some fun. It's dull all alone in the dark. Can't you have me made better, father?"

At times he would cry; piteous, pitiful tears, but the sensitive ear was quick to catch the distress in his father's voice, and he would offer consolation in the midst of his grief. "Don't be sorry, father. I don't want you to be sorry. It doesn't matter; really it doesn't. I have a ripping time!"

Never for a moment did the boy hold his parents responsible for his infirmity; but there came a day when he blamed his God.

"If God can do everything He likes, He could have made me quite right, and well. Why didn't He, father?"

"I don't know, my son."

"*You* would make me better if you could! You said yourself you'd pay the doctor all your money.

You are kinder than Him. I don't think God *is* kind to me, father. It would have been so easy for Him——"

The wisdom for which Francis had prayed and struggled seemed a poor thing at that moment. He was dumb, and yet he dared not be dumb.

"Frankie," he said, "I'll tell you a secret—a secret between you and me. . . God sent me a great many blessings when I was young, and they did me no good. I was selfish, and careless, and blind, too, Frankie, though my eyes could see, and then after He had tried me with happiness and it had failed, He sent me"—the man's voice trembled ominously—"*a great grief!* . . . Frankie, old man, when I come to die, I believe I am going to thank God for that grief, more than for all the blessings which went before."

The child sat silent, struggling for comprehension.

"What did the great grief *do* to you, father?"

Francis paused for a moment, struggling for composure. Then he spoke:

"*It stabbed my dead heart wide awake!*"

He stooped and kissed the child's blind eyes.

VII

THE GIRL WHO ASKED FOR HAPPINESS

FATE is a sorry trickster, and a study of life leads one to the conclusion that the less that is asked of her the less does she bestow.

Meriel, on her part, had made few demands—riches and power had for her no allure; her highest ambition was to attain that quiet domestic happiness enjoyed by thousands of her sister women. She wanted to be loved and to love in return; to transform some trivial villa into a home, and reign therein over her little kingdom; and on her twenty-eighth birthday fate had so wrought the tangled skein that she found herself in the position of unpaid attendant to an old school friend, while her heart was racked by a hopeless passion for the same friend's husband.

The way of it was this. Meriel and Flora had been school friends, between whom existed the affection which often develops between a strong and a weak character when they are thrown into

intimate companionship. Flora was pretty and gay, qualities which in a young girl blind the eyes of beholders to many drawbacks. Meriel was quite resigned to be blinded herself, but some two or three years after the two girls had left school she heard with amazement that Flora was engaged to be married to Geoffrey Sterne, one of the most prominent *littérateurs* of the day.

Geoffrey Sterne and—Flora! How was it that the cleverest of men so often chose weak, clinging women as companions for life? It seemed to Meriel inconceivable that this giant among men should have given his love to an animated doll; but Flora wrote gushing accounts of her fiancé's devotion, and declared that she was as happy as the day was long. It seemed to Meriel that she must indeed be the happiest of women!

Circumstances prevented Meriel's presence at the wedding, and for the next five years she did not see her friend. A child was born and died; rumour reported that Sterne was working incessantly at a work which was to be the *magnum opus* of his life; it was said also that his wife was in delicate health, and had abandoned the dissipations of town. Then at the end of the five years came an invitation in Flora's handwriting. Meriel was not to be vexed with her for being silent for so long; she

had always *intended* to write, simply dreadful how many things were left undone! Really and truly, she had never forgotten the dear old days. Would Meriel come down and pay her a nice long visit? Geoffrey liked to have friends staying in the house; he thought Flora was too much alone; but some visitors were such a nuisance—always poking about. Meriel was not like that—she was always a dear old thing. Would Thursday suit? The 3.13. The car should be waiting at the station. Flora sent heaps of love. . . .

Meriel accepted the invitation without hesitation; she was without near relations, living on narrow means, and her life was so bare that she was thankful of the mere change of scene. She liked the sound of "the car"; most of all she longed to meet Geoffrey Sterne, and see him in the intimacy of his home.

Flora was waiting at the station when her friend arrived; and at the sight of her face came Meriel's first disillusionment. This was not the companion of old; this was a strange woman with whom she had no acquaintance. The once delicate face had lost its contour, the features were blurred and coarsened: out of the blue eyes peered a furtive soul. Meriel felt a presage of trouble at the sight of that ravaged face.

A week's stay at the house revealed two eloquent facts. Flora was afraid of her husband, but she loved him still, and craved for his approval. Out of his presence she was nervous, and irritable, possessed by a demon of restlessness which made it impossible for her to attend to the same thing for two minutes together; but let Sterne enter the room, and all the poor forces of her nature were rallied to appear calm and at ease.

Meriel saw through these efforts with a woman's intuition; later on with a woman's sympathy, for she knew that Geoffrey Sterne no longer loved his wife. He was kindly, chivalrous, attentive; with the utmost of his powers he fulfilled his duty, but there was no spark of that divine flame which would have turned duty into joy. To have gained the love of such a man, and then—to have lost it! Meriel found herself reversing her former decision. She had believed Flora Sterne to be the happiest of women. She now knew her to be the most unfortunate.

There was trouble in the air—a trouble nebulous and vague, yet real enough to chill the blood. The cloud of coming disaster settled down more and more heavily over the household. There came a night when the storm broke.

Sterne had been away all day, and in his absence

his wife's restlessness took an acute turn. She wandered about the house rejecting irritably all offers of help, and finally shut herself up in her own rooms, leaving Meriel a prey to anxiety. What was the reason of Flora's strange behaviour? Was it a pure matter of nerves, or was there in truth some hidden sorrow preying upon her mind, and driving her hither and thither in search of oblivion? What sorrow could Flora have? Grief over the death of her child had long since faded into a placid conclusion that all was for the best. It had been a dear little thing, but children were a tie. . . . She was glad there had been no other. . . . For the rest, life had brought her the most luxurious of homes, the most attentive of husbands, and if that attention was not induced by the highest motive, Meriel doubted if the dulled mind grasped the lack. What sorrow, then, could Flora have?

The afternoon wore slowly away, until the hour approached when Sterne would return, when a feeling of responsibility drove Meriel to follow Flora to her boudoir. She did not wish Geoffrey to return to find his wife suffering and alone.

The room was darkened, so that it was impossible to see distinctly, but the sound of a low moan

reached her ears, and prone on the sofa lay Flora, her face sunk deep in the piled-up cushions.

Meriel spoke, but there was no reply; she knelt down and pressed the cushion from the hidden face, but the eyes remained closed, the jaw fixed and fallen. Poor Flora! Her sufferings had been real enough, since in the end they had culminated in this heavy swoon. Meriel threw open windows, found water and smelling salts, and unloosed the clothing round the neck. In the midst of her efforts Sterne entered, and with quick glance took in the situation. He brought a flask of brandy from his room, and from time to time inserted a few drops within the parted lips. But Flora did not revive. She moaned and stirred, but her eyes remained closed. She showed no consciousness of their presence. In hot haste a doctor was summoned; he came, and stood gazing grimly down at the still figure.

"We did everything we could think of before sending for you," Sterne explained. "Fanned her, sponged her head, gave her brandy——"

The doctor looked at him—a terrible look.

"*Brandy!*" he repeated deeply. "Man, have you no eyes? What have you been about to allow her to come to this pass? She is not faint. She is drunk!"

Flora's remorse was a pitiful thing. For years she had been playing with fire, but the knowledge of the depths to which she had fallen filled her with shame and fear. For days together she refused to see her husband, but from the first moment of consciousness she clung with a childish desperation to the friend of her youth.

"Don't leave me! Don't go away! I can't face it alone. Oh, Meriel, stay and help me to bear it. I'm afraid to be left alone with Geoffrey. He will say nothing—he'll go on being kind, but it will be in his mind. . . . I shall see it in his eyes. . . . I've disgraced him, and I'm afraid—I'm afraid of the future! . . . Oh, Meriel, stay and help me!"

That night, walking in the darkening garden, Meriel told Sterne of his wife's desire, and added a few simple words.

"If you wish it, too, I will stay," she said. "I have no home ties, and can extend my visit as long as it suits you. But I must have your approval. If you would prefer a regular attendant——"

His face twitched with emotion.

"I should—*abhor* it!" he said tensely. "If you could stay, it would be a godsend, but it seems too great a sacrifice. . . . We have no

right to ask it. Why should you give up so much?"

"I have so little to give up," Meriel said. She looked into Sterne's face with a pathetic attempt at a smile. "I am a superfluous woman. Nobody needs me, and all my life I have longed to be needed. If I can be of use here, I'd rather stay than go anywhere on earth."

"God bless you!" he said, and gripped her hand.

That was the signing of the agreement which resulted in four years of ceaseless service. At the beginning Meriel had contemplated a stay of a few months; but with every week that passed she seemed more firmly riveted in her post. After each breakdown, Flora's dread of being alone with her husband increased in violence, while he shrank more sensitively from the services of a hireling. They needed her, and she stayed on and on, at first provisionally; later, as a matter of course.

From the beginning Sterne had little hope of his wife's reformation, for he realized that her weakness was of several years' growth, and that the inherent instability of her character unfitted her for the prolonged struggle which lay ahead. As a matter of fact, after the first passion of remorse had worn itself out, the whole of Flora's energies were expended in the attempt to deceive her companions,

and to discover secret methods of indulging her craving. The history of those four years was one of recurrent disappointment. The last remnant of beauty died out of Flora's face; Sterne's dark hair was streaked with grey, Meriel's features were fined to a delicate sharpness; her eyes had the pathetic wistfulness of a dumb animal. From the first moment of meeting her heart had gone out to Geoffrey Sterne; before she had been three months under his roof she loved him with an absorbing passion, and for four long years she had stood by, watching his torture, holding her love in check. Surely no man and woman were ever thrown together in more intimate relationship. Night after night they wrestled together against the demon which destroyed their peace; week after week, month after month, they planned and consulted, toiled and failed, hoped and sorrowed,—together, always together; virtually alone, yet always with that pitiful presence holding them apart.

Sterne was as chivalrous to his friend as to his wife. Never by look or deed did he pass the borders of friendship. With one part of her nature Meriel was thankful for the fact. It would have marred her admiration of the man's character if he had made love to the woman who was ministering to his wife. With another part of her nature

she longed fiercely, hungrily, to feel the touch of his lips, the grasp of his arms. There were times when she was shaken with envy of the poor creature who still claimed his tenderness and his care, but she never deluded herself that Sterne returned her love. It seemed to her that her own near association with the tragedy of his life must in itself prevent such a possibility. In years to come, when poor Flora had found her rest, Sterne might meet some sweet woman who lived in the sunshine, and find happiness with her. "He will forget, and be comforted. He will love her the more for all he has suffered." Meriel felt an anguish of envy for that other woman who would enjoy the happiness denied to herself, a bitter rebellion against her own fate.

"I have given my youth, my strength, my soul—and what have I gained in return? Emptiness and suffering!" she cried fiercely. Then added, with a sombre triumph, "But she can never help him as I have helped! He can never need her as he has needed me!"

The end of the four years found the three embarked for India to try the effect of "suggestion" under a famous professor of the East. It was a forlorn chance, as it was doubtful if Flora retained enough brain power to respond to the treatment;

but something was hoped from the change of scene and the healthful effects of the voyage.

Meriel welcomed the change with relief. Flora's increasing disability had of late thrown her husband and friend into what was practically a prolonged *tête-à-tête*, and the strain of constant self-repression had grown beyond endurance. In the turmoil of travelling such close intimacy would be impossible, and her own tired nerves would be refreshed.

For the first fortnight all went well. The Bay was smooth, the Mediterranean blue and smiling; even Flora herself was roused to a feeble admiration. She was so quiet and amenable that Meriel was able to leave her for hours together in the charge of her maid, while she herself lay on a deck chair, luxuriating in the peace and beauty of the scene. Sometimes Sterne would sit by her side, and they would talk together,—brief, disconnected fragments of talk, interrupted by intervals of silence. They spoke of happier days; of their youth, their dreams and ambitions, the glowing optimism of early hopes.

Sterne had started his career with the finest ambition which a writer can know: a passing popularity would not satisfy him, money was regarded merely as a means to live; his aim was to write

words which should endure after he himself was laid to rest, and to that aim he had held fast, despite all the trials and discouragements of his life. To him, as to every writer, came the realization that his power to help and uplift was measured by his own suffering. His readers were enriched by his poverty. There were times when the knowledge soothed, times again when the natural man rose in revolt, and demanded bread for his own soul.

"You tell me that I have succeeded," he said bitterly to Meriel; "but I have never tasted the savour of success. I have no child to inherit my name, and my wife does not care—even in the early days she cared nothing for my work. Never in her life has she read an article of mine from beginning to end. When I told her of a fresh commission she asked always—'How much will it be?' After the first year I never mentioned my work. The poorest clerk hurrying home to tell his wife of a ten-pound rise, feeling sure of her sympathy and understanding, is richer than I. He *has* his reward!"

Meriel found courage to ask a question which had long hovered on her lips.

"You were so very different. At school Flora never pretended to be intellectual. Why did you ever——"

"Marry her?" his face softened, he drew a retrospective sigh. "I loved her, Meriel! That was the reason. She was young, and sweet, and trustful, and when a pretty girl steals into a man's heart he does not stop to inquire into her brain powers. I have reproached myself because the glamour so soon faded, but I am thankful to remember that it was an honest marriage; I loved her truly, and she loved me. My poor Flora! I believe she does still. It's very pitiful."

Meriel turned her head so that he should not see her face. The tenderness of his tone was painful to her, the thought of those early days of married love tortured her heart. The world seemed to her a cruel place, where men and women were tried beyond their strength.

"At least you have had something!" she told him wistfully. "Your golden time passed quickly, but you had the experience. You are a man, and to men work comes first. You can lose yourself in it, forget your disappointments, and escape to a new world. And you have made a great reputation. Men praise you, admire you, are helped by you. Doesn't *that* help?"

"I wonder," he said vaguely. "I wonder!"

They sat in silence gazing at the waste of waters sparkling in the noonday sun. When after some

moments he spoke again, it was apparently to introduce a new topic.

"What do you feel about colour, Meriel? Does it speak to you? Look at those great waves to-day! . . . The blue of them, the deepest, truest blue that it is possible to conceive, and the shafts of green, cutting across the blue, and the purple shadows, and above all, the foamy torrent of white! Things that one has done oneself are so poor, so unsatisfying; but the big things last. The sea comforts me, Meriel; the bigness of it, the beauty of it. Why should we fret, and be troubled? It will pass! Everything passes. We have only to be faithful; to stick to our posts, and look ahead!"

But Meriel was a woman, with a woman's heart that refused to find comfort in philosophy. She looked at the changeful sea, but the very beauty of it brought a heavier weight, for she was one of the tender souls who are dependent on companionship for her joys. If Sterne had loved her, and had been free to love, she would have entered into his joy in Nature with ready understanding, but she was suffering from an intolerable loneliness of spirit, to which the glory of the scene around added the last touch of bitterness.

"It doesn't comfort me," she said. "I need

something nearer; more personal; something of my own. You have suffered, but you have also enjoyed. It is easier to be resigned when you have possessed, even if the possessions have had to go. If you haven't had *all* that you asked of life, at least you have had a great deal. Some of us have nothing!"

He looked at her as she gazed wistfully into space, a woman aged before her time, with a sweet sad face, worn with the burden of his own sorrows.

"What did you ask?" he inquired softly.

"I asked for Happiness," Meriel said, and turned her eyes on him with a pitiful smile.

There was a long silence before he answered, but when he spoke his voice was tremulous with feeling.

"Ah, Meriel!" he cried; "and we have given you Duty! . . . It's a cold thing to fill a woman's heart. . . . I've reproached myself a thousand times. . . . I should not have allowed you to sacrifice yourself. . . . It must not go on!"

A spasm of fear ran through her veins.

"It's the nearest approach to happiness I've ever known."

"Nevertheless," he said firmly, "it shall not go on. We have no right to murder your joy. Help

me through the next few months, and then, whatever happens, we start afresh!"

"But if I want to stay?"

He shook his head with a finality from which she knew there was no appeal. What Geoffrey Sterne said he meant, to the last letter of the word, and there was no turning him from a decision. Meriel felt the terror of one who, playing among flowers, sees a sudden vision of a serpent's head. A moment before their lives had seemed indefinitely linked, now, in a few months, must come separation, as complete as though they were at opposite ends of the world, for Sterne now lived entirely in his country home, and shunned the society of his fellows. She searched his face for some sign of grief, even of regret, but the stern features were set in a mask-like composure. The terrible suspicion stabbed her that he might be *glad;* that he was wearied of the burden of gratitude!

For the next few days Meriel and Sterne mutually avoided being left alone, which was the more easily accomplished, as Flora was showing signs of renewed restlessness and irritability. The novelty of the voyage had worn off, the heat of the Canal had tried her endurance, and dreaded symptoms called for renewed vigilance on the part of her attendants. Now they were out on the Indian

Ocean; but for once the change brought little relief and the nerves of the travellers were tried still further by a slight accident to the engines, which involved a slackening of speed. They were within three days' sail of Colombo when the glass fell sharply after a period of intense heat—a danger signal, which to the understanding was rendered more alarming by the sound of hammerings from below, denoting fresh mischief in the machinery.

A cyclonic storm was upon them, and the boat altered her course to avoid its centre—a perilous business in face of the long chain of reefs stretching southward from the Laccadives. At nightfall there came up a grey swell accompanied by almost unbearable heat, the wind rapidly increased, and in an hour the gale burst upon them in all its fury. That night was a nightmare of horror, for although the boat was headed for the open sea, the crippled engines were unable to support the strain, and she was therefore driven back into the danger zone. The waters were lashed into a churning fury, the wind yelled with a deafening menace. Flora cowered in bed in a panic of terror, but to Meriel the tumult of the elements brought relief rather than dread. They voiced the tumult of her own mind; the shriek of the wind was as the shriek of her own tortured heart.

The dawn was breaking when the crash came, a thunderous crash of rock and steel as the great vessel struck the reef, shook herself free, and struck again, her stern grinding deep into the rock. In that moment every soul on board looked death in the face, and it seemed, indeed, as though death were inevitable. The heroic efforts of the crew succeeded in launching the boats, but several of the number were swamped before the eyes of the beholders, and for the rest the chance of survival on such a sea seemed small indeed. Even so, there was a fight for a place, for to remain on the ship meant a certainty of death, and the wildest chance is precious in such a plight, but among the men and women who fought and struggled was no member of Geoffrey Sterne's party.

Flora's panic of terror had been so violent that it had been necessary to drug her with a strong sleeping draught, and the faithful maid refused to leave her side. Sterne had, indeed, made an attempt to persuade Meriel to try for a place, but she had flamed into bitter anger, and he had not persisted. He saw her seated with the other waiting ones in the stern of the vessel, already tilted high above the bow, and turned in silence to make his way to his wife.

That moment for Meriel was the bitterest of all.

The act of death itself had for her no terror; it was the parting from Geoffrey Sterne which wrung her heart. So inextricably had her life become woven with his that she had no wish to live in a world from which he was absent, and if she lived on, separation was bound to come. Only one unutterable regret filled her soul—she was going out into eternity a maimed, stunted thing, from whom had been withheld the meaning of life, the deepest part of whose nature had been persistently starved.

"If for even one minute I could have said, '*I am happy!*' I could have died content. But I have never known happiness, and now death is coming, and I am waiting for it alone."

In that last word lay the sting. She was alone; the solitary unit among the crowd who had no one to comfort her, and to comfort in return; to whose hand no one clung as to the one sure support. She was alone!

At that moment she saw him coming, edging his way along the sloping deck, with the sure foot, the calm, deliberate movements, which were so emblematic of his strength. Cautiously, slowly, as he came, there was never a moment of wavering in his course. His mind had registered her position among the crowd of waiting figures; quietly, steadily, he was making his way to her side.

Meriel looked around. Surrounded as she was, she was yet in a solitude as vast as space. To right and left the mummied figures crouched in hypnotized calm, oblivious of everything but themselves and their own peril. She was alone on the great deck,—alone, but for that other figure, climbing step by step to her side.

The early light shone on him as he came, lighting up his figure with an unearthly distinctness. She saw the grey streaks in the dark hair, the furrows which sorrow had carved upon his brow, yet despite them all there was about the whole figure an air of youth, an alertness and confidence of bearing, which she had never before beheld. He bore himself like a freed man, from whose limbs the fetters have fallen.

Another moment and he was beside her, crouched on the deck with his face close to her own. The freed look was in his eyes.

"She is still sleeping," he said; "she will not wake. It is better so. I can do no more for her. And so—at last!—I can come to you."

"Yes," assented Meriel breathlessly. There was more to come, she read it in his face, in the thrilling tone of his voice. She waited, her being strung with an agony of longing.

"There are only a few minutes left, and we have

waited so long! We must not waste them now that they are here. . . . Come to me, Meriel!"

He held out his arms and she swayed into them; his lips were on hers; they clung together with the stored-up passion of years. For a minute the communion of touch brought a fullness of joy, then the craving arose to hear the wonder put into words.

"You love me? It is true? Oh, Geoffrey—how long?"

"Since the moment we met. How could I help it? It was inevitable. We belong!" He held her face between his hands, bending so close that she could feel his breath on her cheek. "You have been my star and my sun; sunshine of noon; light in the darkness. You have been comfort and rest; deliverance from despair. You have been my love, and my queen, and my inspiration; the one beautiful strong thing that stood fast among the ruins. Everything that a woman could be to a man you have been to me for four long years!"

"Thank God!" she sobbed. "Oh, thank God! It is worth it all to hear you say that. But, oh, Geoffrey, there were times—so many times! when I would have given my life a hundred times over to have lain like this, to have felt your arms. It was hard to struggle on, fighting one's heart, and

now at last when we have come together, to be obliged to part! Oh, Geoffrey, to say good-bye so soon!"

"No," he said deeply. "Not that. We'll say no good-bye. We have stuck to our posts, but where we are going there can be no tie but the one which binds your heart to mine. We belong! Nothing can part us. Shut your eyes, beloved! rest against me. It's the night that is coming,—a short night, and a nightmare dream, and then, for you and me"—his voice swelled to a note of triumphant expectation—"*the morning!*"

"Oh, I'm so happy!" cried Meriel, trembling. "Oh, I'm so happy!"

The deck shivered and reeled. From every side rose a shrilling of voices. The great ship reared herself on end, and plunged headlong into the deep.

So the barrier fell!

VIII

THE MAN WHO WISHED FOR DANGER

VAL LESSING'S thirtieth birthday found him strong, handsome, prosperous, and—discontented. This is unfortunately a common combination, but Val acknowledged to himself that if other men in like position had small cause to grumble, he himself had less, for while they ungraciously demanded of fate still more than they had received, his one annoyance was that he had enjoyed so much.

He had never desired to find himself at thirty a director of a prosperous City firm; the thing had come about through a succession of unforeseen events. The death of his father had made it necessary that he should take up business immediately after leaving Oxford; that was blow number one, for he had been promised a tour round the world before settling down to work, and in its place found himself obliged to look forward to yearly fortnights lengthening, as a reward of merit, to a possible three weeks.

Val hated the work, but he set himself to it with characteristic dash and energy. He possessed a bull-dog inability to let go of any scheme once undertaken, which marked him out sharply from the ordinary more or less mechanical employees, and endeared him to the principals of the firm.

The "Chief" singled him out for special service. His salary rose steadily year by year, and on the date on which this history begins, he had been formally presented with a proportion of shares, and advanced to the dignity of a Director in the Company.

"And now," said the Chief in congratulation, "your foot is safely planted on the ladder of fortune. You can count on at least fifteen hundred a year."

Walking towards his home that night Val grudgingly considered those words. As a sane, sensible man, he must of course rejoice that his work had brought him so good a reward, yet there was something in the wording of that sentence which chafed an old sore. *Safe!* That was the sting. A man of thirty years, and—*safe!* Secured from anxiety, lapped round with comforts—nothing to do now but keep steadily along the beaten rut. Eight-fifty Tube in the morning; six o'clock Tube at night; two-thirty Tube on Saturday afternoons,

always the same black-coated, tall-hatted figure growing, with the passage of years, a thought heavier, a thought wider, but always sleek, always composed—always *safe!*

Val Lessing reviewed the prospect, and once again, more wildly than ever, his vagrant heart cried out in protest. Oh! it had been a different life to which he had looked forward in the days that were gone—the mad, glad, foolhardy days when all he had asked of fate was a passage through that highway of adventure, where a thrill lay behind every bush, and a danger at every turn.

Danger—danger—the very word brought exhilaration; the ring of it, the thrill of it, the wild, sweet savour which it bore! Oh, to be out on the highway, away from the treadmill of City life; oh, to wake in the morning, to pull aside a flapping canvas, inhale the clean air blowing over great plains, and across frowning ridges of mountains, to step forth on the day's quest, sure of nothing, nothing in all the world, but of danger to overcome!

Val Lessing's home was represented by a bachelor flat, presided over by a respectable middle-aged couple. The mother for whose sake he had resigned himself to a business career had died some years before, but he was still responsible for a

young brother and sister, and obliged to make a home for them during holiday seasons. The noisy incursion was not always welcome, all the same the flat became a very dreary place when the lively pair had taken themselves schoolwards once more, and a solitary dinner was a thing to be avoided.

Lessing, as a bachelor, had grown into the habit of taking the evening meal in town, and had discovered a certain very Bohemian restaurant where most excellent cooking was supplied to as odd a looking company as ever assembled within four walls. He found a never-ending interest in watching his fellow diners and pondering over the secrets of their existence. It was at least safe to conclude that they did not share his own ground for complaint! Dinner over, Lessing frequently succumbed to an impulse which drew him towards a large corner house in a square adjoining his flat, wherein a particularly happy family party lived, and loved, and laughed, and extended the most cordial of welcomes to uninvited guests.

Mr. Gordon was a business man, who, having accumulated a modest "pile," had promptly retired from the City, and now devoted himself to the performance of good works for the benefit of others, and the collection of old china for the satisfaction of himself. Mrs. Gordon was a

matron of the plump and complacent order, an excellent manager, who did not know the meaning of fuss, and whose servants invariably stayed with her for years, and then departed, laden with spoils, to espouse a local baker or grocer, and live happily ever afterwards.

Delia, the daughter, was a minx. She was slim and tall, and had crinkly dark eyebrows, and an oval face, and misty grey eyes with a dreamy, far-away expression, and fringed with a double row of preposterously long eyelashes. She looked particularly dreamy and inaccessible when young men came in to call, and they mentally abased themselves before her, gazing with dazzled eyes at the pinnacle on which she stood, in maiden meditation,—exquisitely, wondrously, crystally unconscious of their own rough existence. And all the time there was not a line of their features, not a kink in their neckties, that that minx Delia did not see with the minuteness of a microscope!

Terence, the son, was walking the hospitals, kept a collection of bones in his coat pocket, and looked upon life as a huge jest organized for his special benefit; loyally returning the compliment by playing jests himself on every available opportunity. In holiday time, he was most useful as a companion to the two scholars with whom he was a

prime favourite, but in term time Lessing regarded him with mitigated favour. As a conversationalist he preferred the father; as a confidante, the mother; where Delia was concerned he preferred a *tête-à-tête*. Terence was a very good sort, but he was apt to be decidedly *de trop*.

On the evening of the day on which he had been made a director of his company, Lessing took his way to the corner house, and found the amiable quartette disporting themselves after their separate ways in the comfortable sitting-room which was their favourite evening resort. Mr. Gordon was reading the latest treatise on Oriental china. Mrs. Gordon was knitting mufflers for deep-sea fishermen, and lending an appreciative ear to Delia, who, seated at the grand piano, was singing ballads in a very small but penetratingly sweet voice. It was part of Delia's minxiness that she elected to sing songs intended for masculine lovers, wherein were set forth panegyrics which might most aptly be applied to herself. On this occasion she was declaiming that "My love is like a red, red rose that's newly blown in June. Oh, my love's like a mel-o-dy that's sweetly played in tune"; and so sweet was the air, so sweet the rose-like bloom of her own youth, that her father's eyes strayed continuously from his pages, and rested on her

with an admiration reverent in its intensity. "She is too beautiful, too pure for this world"; his eyes seemed to say. "Can it be possible that she is really my own daughter?" The mother's eyes strayed also, but there was no reverence in her gaze. She had been a minx herself.

Terence was reading the latest popular thriller, and from time to time diversifying the entertainment by kicking one of his patent leather pumps into the air, and adroitly fitting his toes into it on its return journey, an accomplishment on which he had wasted golden hours.

They all looked up and smiled a welcome as Val Lessing entered and went round the room greeting each member of the family in turn.

"Good evening, Mrs. Gordon. Good evening, sir. Delia, please! Don't let me interrupt."

Delia smiled absently, and crossed the room to a deep chair which was supplied with an admirable foil for white shoulders in the shape of a black satin cushion. She had the air of being only partially aware of Lessing's presence, but in reality she was acutely conscious of everything concerning him, even to a certain air of impatience which was due to the importance of the news which he had to communicate. Delia was in love with Val Lessing, and was uncomfortably aware of the fact. Val was in

love with Delia, but remained as yet in comfortable ignorance. Delia had always planned that it should be the other way about. She had pictured herself being wooed with assiduous devotion by a lover who refused to be daunted by a dozen noes. It was ignominious to realize that she was now waiting impatiently for the chance to cry, "Yes, please!"

Val seated himself, nodding carelessly at Terence, who greeted him by a brilliant example of slipper catching, and cried genially:

"Well, old Tomkins, what's the matter with you? You look as if something was sitting pretty heavy on your chest!"

"It is!" said Val, and Delia's heart went a little excursion on its own accord. *Was* he going to say that he was *engaged?*

"Good news, I hope, eh, Lessing?" cried Mr. Gordon, and for the fraction of a second Val hesitated.

"Er—yes. I suppose—that is, of course, it is very good indeed. I've been made a director."

Everybody exclaimed, everybody enthused, everybody congratulated, with the exception of Delia, who asked lazily: "What is a director?" and yawned when she was told. Mr. Gordon showed the sympathy of understanding, but after

putting many questions, and listening to half-hearted replies, he frowned, and delivered himself of an honest criticism.

"You're not half as pleased as you ought to be, Lessing! A man of your age ought to be thankful to be in such a position. A start of fifteen hundred a year—in such a firm too. Good, safe, solid people. No fear of them going in for speculation and landing you in the bankruptcy court. Humanly speaking you're safe from anxiety for the rest of your life."

"Er—yes. That's just it." Lessing said vaguely, but his friends understood. It was not the first time that he had rebelled in their hearing; not the first time by many that he had sighed for the vagrant's lot.

"He doesn't want to be safe, bless you! That's just what gets him on the raw!" Terence said grinning. "He wants to be a fire-and-thunder swashbuckler, out on the pathless wilds."

"What is a swashbuckler?" asked Delia, and Val laughed, and said:

"The very opposite to a director in a black coat and tall hat, Delia. Think it out for yourself! I only wish I had the chance."

Delia looked thoughtful. She was apportioning fifteen hundred pounds on the upkeep of her

future home. She decided on a small flat and a runabout car, and rather thought that the drawing-room should be pink. Mrs. Gordon said seriously:

"Dear Val, you must get the better of these foolish ideas! They are spoiling your life. You have so much that other men want, that it seems really wicked to be discontented because you have not—trouble! Oh, my dear boy, it will come soon enough! You ought to be thankful!"

"But it's not trouble, Mrs. Gordon! I want trouble no more than any other man. It's danger that fascinates me—adventure—the thrill of the unknown. It was born in me, I suppose. My ancestors were a race of explorers. If I had been able to have a fling in my youth, I might have been able to settle down, but I went straight from Oxford to the City, and a longing that is bottled up doesn't diminish, it goes on growing all the time. When Mr. Baron told me the news to-day, I felt—you'll be horrified at my ingratitude!—as if a halter had been slipped round my neck."

Mr. Gordon shook his head.

"It's a thousand pities that you could not take that trip! If you'd been *my* son I'd have packed you off with five pounds in your pocket, to work your own way round the world. You'd have had enough excitement to last you for the rest of your

life—and danger into the bargain. You'd be thankful *then* to settle down to your present life."

"Oh, I'm thankful enough now. It's quite a good life as things go, but just a bit boring."

Terence kicked his slipper once more.

"Well—what price the hospital ball next week? *That* won't be boring, I give you my word. We're having a party to dinner here, and going on together. If you like to chip in——"

"Terence! Don't be cruel. We really must not add to his boredom!" cried Delia, smiling, but there was an edge in her smile.

Terence grimaced expressively at Lessing, a grimace which said, "Now you've done it! She's got her knife into you for that remark!"

Kindly Mrs. Gordon sensed the strain in the atmosphere, and said quickly:

"Do sing something more to us, Delia darling. You had only begun. A few more of those dear old ballads!"

Delia was like her mother, she never made a fuss, so she rose with a slow, graceful gesture, seated herself in her old place, and sang one strain after another with the utmost good humour. The last of all was that delightful ballad entitled "Phillida flouts me," and this she delivered with much energy and verve, throwing aside her languid airs to

adopt the very attitude of the damsel of the song.

Lessing loved to hear Delia sing, and to-night he laughed with the rest, at the pretty by-play of tossing head and curling lips, but he was not altogether happy in his mind. He remembered the chill of the girl's voice a few minutes before, as she said: "We mustn't bore him still more!" and he felt uncomfortable as if it were he himself who was being flouted.

As he walked down the quiet streets on his way home, the words repeated themselves in his brain:

> "Oh, what a plague is love! I cannot bear it
> Alack and well a-day. Phillida flouts me!"

. . . . . .

It was the night after the hospital ball, and Lessing was dining at his favourite restaurant, hoping thereby to counteract a fit of unusual depression. He had not enjoyed that ball; it was borne in upon him that Delia had not intended him to enjoy it. She had deliberately filled her programme before the night, and vouchsafed him only one extra, and during the dancing thereof had stopped three times over to inquire if he were *quite* sure he was not bored! Delia was angry with him. Delia most pronouncedly was disposed to "flout."

There was an ache at Lessing's heart which seemed ludicrously out of proportion with the cause.

For the first half of his meal he sat alone at his table, then the seat opposite him was taken by one of the swarthy bearded foreigners with which the place abounded. He was a man of early middle age, with a mop of black hair slightly tinged with grey, overhanging eyebrows, and a general air of poverty and Bohemianism. He ate hungrily, as though such good food did not often come his way, and as he ate his eyes roamed stealthily round the room. Lessing decided that he was in search of a confederate—the man's appearance suggested the word—and that he was puzzled and alarmed by the absence of what he sought. He decided to dally with his own meal so as to see this thing out. Many a time he had longed for an opportunity of adventure. Now it might be at hand. If the two men met, he would leave the restaurant in their wake and track them through the narrow streets! He recalled written scenes concerning open doorways, fights on staircases, and the like, and thrilled with anticipation.

Throughout his meal the Bearded One continued his scrutiny, and Lessing noticed that his glance lingered tentatively on one or two men present as though uncertain of their identity. It was not

entirely by appearance, then, that he could distinguish his confederate! There was evidently a sign which would expose one to the other, and then suddenly, with his eyes fixed on a diner at an adjacent table, the Bearded One raised his knife, and with a clean, incisive movement swept the salt from his plate on to the table.

The other diner ate on undisturbed, but an electric shock of excitement tingled through Lessing's veins. More than once before he had observed this deliberate spilling of the salt on the round-topped tables of that restaurant, so often, indeed, that he had made sure in his own mind that it was in the nature of a signal from one member of a fraternity to another. The spilling of the salt—symbol from all ages of disaster, a meet signal indeed for these dark and dangerous men!

With an impulse which crystallized the longings of years, Lessing attracted his companion's attention by a hasty movement, and then, lifting high his knife, swept his own salt on to the cloth so that the white dust scattered and mingled with the dust already spread.

The effect was instantaneous. The swarthy face bent forward to meet his own, the eyes gleamed, the guttural voice breathed a deep, low word:

"*Brother!*"

"*Brother!*" whispered Lessing in return. His pulses were racing, but he held himself resolutely in hand. A false move might spoil all. He must be silent, and let the other man do the talking. He sat in an attitude of attention while the Bearded One crouched over the table, speaking in baited tones. His accent was rather Jewish than foreign, a thick, ugly voice, thickened as though by some physical obstruction.

"I have been waiting. The time is short. I must be hurrying on. There are many places where I must carry the news!" His voice sank to an almost unhearable depth. "*It is for to-night!*"

"To-night!" gasped Lessing in return. His real dismay at the nearness of the unknown happening supplied a genuine note to his exclamation, and it appeared that surprise was expected.

"To-night! To-night! The chief has given the order. It is his way to make all ready, and at the last to give but a few hours' notice. It is safer so. He has a wise head. All is arranged, and to-morrow, by this time to-morrow—" His lips rolled back, the large prominent teeth gleamed in a smile of diabolic delight. "London, the city of the oppressors—what will be left of the

great London then? Nothing but a wilderness of fire and ruin!"

Lessing's blood ran cold. An adventurer at heart, he yet had the true Englishman's love of the metropolis. At the thought of danger to London he winced as at a personal wound; in his heart dawned the surprising conviction that he would risk his own life, not once, but a dozen times over, to avert the destruction of that grey old pile.

The destruction of London—mad words! Mad fancy! Was this man a maniac that he spoke of such an impossible feat? Agitated, almost gasping for breath, Lessing heard himself stammer detached words of inquiry:

"When? Where? Where— How do they start——?"

The answer came back in a low hissing whisper:

"The oil tanks on the Thames! Ah—ha, it is a great scheme, a fine scheme. The fuel is lying there, ready to our hands. Three Brothers have volunteered for the bomb throwing. They will die for a great cause. Their names will be remembered as martyrs among us. The burning oil will flare out to the Thames. Think of it! Think of it! A river of flaming oil, joined by other rivers; all the tanks exploded, one by one; the

stream of fire flowing along, leaving behind burning shipping, burning banks, spreading ruin to right and left. Think of it, Brother, think of it! Think of the dark stairways and passages, where a man may creep, a man with a torch helping the work, sending the sparks to a fresh home. Who can guard miles of river bank? Who can distinguish one worker from another? Ah, it will be a brave night, a brave night. We have waited, Brother, we have appeared to submit, but now—now——"

His voice grew hoarse with excitement. Lessing pressed his knee gently beneath the table.

"Careful. Be careful. We are observed. Give me my orders!"

The Bearded One drew himself up, and made a pretence of continuing his meal. His voice sank to its old, guttural tones.

"To stay here, and pass round the word. All the Brothers to be on duty, except those watched by the police. Red Fist and Wharbuton to leave by the nine o'clock train from Charing Cross, and cross to Paris. Their departure is to be as public as possible. It would be well if they were given a send-off. If they are out of the way the watch will be relaxed. At all costs they must be found. I go on to other places, you stay here, meet other Brothers, give them all this message. Red Fist

and Wharbuton to be found and sent off. All others on duty to-night. Not a moment to waste."

"Right," said Lessing quickly, and the Bearded One rose from his seat. Then followed a moment of tension, for suddenly, as if in default of a parting signal, the beetling brows frowned upon him, and a glance of indecision swept across the face. Lessing sensed the danger, and leaped to avert it. Touching the salt with his fingers, he said meaningly: "We are watched, Brother. We are watched!" and bent his head over his plate.

There was a breathless silence, then the thick voice bade him good night, and he knew that the danger was past. The next moment the swing doors of the restaurant opened and shut. The Bearded One had disappeared.

For an endless five minutes Lessing forced himself to sit still, then he paid his account, put on his hat, and opening the door, stood on the outer step of the restaurant looking anxiously to right and to left. He had purposely left behind his coat, since in the event of finding the Bearded One still hanging about, he could then be able to assert that he was impatiently waiting for the arrival of more Brothers. The night was chill and there were but few pedestrians in the narrow street. Running his

eye to right and left he could count a dozen in all, no one of whom bore any resemblance in figure or clothing to his late companion.

A better moment for escape could not be desired, and as if sent by Providence a taxi suddenly came into sight, and the chauffeur held up an inquiring hand. In another second Lessing was seated inside, and had given an address in Mayfair. He did not risk returning for his coat, a telephone message to the manager would possibly secure it from theft, if not the coat must go. This was not a moment for considering coats.

Lessing sat motionless on his seat until the taxi had covered a couple of miles westwards, when he touched the communicating cord and startled the chauffeur by an imperative order:

"Scotland Yard. And as quick as you can go!"

. . . . . .

Throughout the years that followed Lessing remembered his interview with the Scotland Yard officials with a smarting indignation. To his excited senses the calmness, the stolidity, the insistent incredulity which greeted his story, were exasperating to the last degree. He discovered to his dismay that the first impression left on his hearers was that he himself was drunk, but the realization forced him to a composure which won an eventual

grudging attention. The officials reiterated that the scheme propounded was impracticable, but a minute description of the Bearded One, together with the signal of the spilling of salt, made an undoubted effect. It was known to the police that such a signal did indeed exist among certain societies, and its usage on the present occasion was of evident weight. Lessing was assured that immediate steps should be taken to ensure the safety of the oil tanks. He had the satisfaction of hearing telephonic messages dispatched to various police centres, giving instructions for largely increased guard. There was nothing more to be done. He had given the alarm; had held to his point until he had succeeded in securing immediate help. Sleep was impossible for him that night, but he would return to his rooms, pass the time with a book and a pipe, until the fateful hour had passed. He passed out into the street, and looked round for the taxi which he had instructed to wait. To his annoyance it was not to be seen, but after a momentary hesitation it occurred to him that there might be some rule forbidding vehicles to remain before the entrance, as in the crowded thoroughfares of the west, and that he might find the man waiting round one of the nearest turnings.

He strode on therefore, but without success,

till finally he decided to take the nearest cut which should lead him to a Tube station. The cut was represented by a narrow lane, lined on either side with small shops. Lessing walked sharply, looking neither to right nor left. The interview had left him nervously exhausted, and he shivered in the chill night air; he was irritated with the recalcitrant chauffeur, irritated with himself for failing to do the one sensible thing under the circumstances—turn back into the office, and telephone for another car. To walk through the streets in the vicinity of Scotland Yard, a noticeable figure without outer coat or wrapping, was the last thing in the world which he should have done on such an occasion.

But it was too late to turn back. A few more minutes would take him to the Tube station, or better still to a thoroughfare where he could pick up another car.

By this time Lessing had reached the end of the cross-road, at which was situated an eating-house of a rough and unsavoury appearance. As he approached the door it opened, and a group of men streamed into the street, talking together in some eager unintelligible patois, at the sound of which a shiver of impending danger shot through Lessing's veins. Instinctively he averted his head, and

quickened his pace, but instinct was a true prophet, it projected the coming event upon his brain, so that he knew what was before him, before the dark, bearded face glared into his, and the thick voice hissed the eloquent word into his ear:

"*Traitor!*"

Lessing did not stop to think. He was one to six, and escape was the necessity of the moment. He took to his heels, ran at full speed until the narrow lane was left behind, and the lights of Trafalgar Square shone around him, when following his first impulse he leaped into a taxi, and told the man to drive to Oxford Circus.

He had behaved like a fool, and like a fool he had been trapped, but the game was not yet up. His identity was unknown, and by avoiding the neighbourhood of the restaurant he could with ease cut himself off from all likelihood of encountering the Brethren. Lessing's blood tingled in his veins, his whole being was flooded with exhilaration. Here was life, here was excitement, here, at long last, within the confines of the grey city itself, was the thrill of pursuit! For they would be after him, following him no doubt in one of the numerous cars blocking the roads, with intent to track him to his lair, but Lessing laughed at the thought with glad youthful confidence. He was not to be

caught twice over. He would give them a run—such a run as they had not known for many a long day, but he would slip them in the end!

It was two hours later when Lessing let himself into his rooms, but he entered with the smiling face of the man who wins; and in good truth he had reason to be proud. He had dodged, he had evaded, he had doubled back on his own tracks with an almost incredible celerity. He had left crowded Tube carriages, lost himself in the crowd on the platform, and jumped back into the same carriage, the last passenger to enter before the door was closed. He had changed from taxi to train, from train to taxi, and once, finding himself in a stationary block, had deposited half a crown on the seat of his own car, stepped deftly on to an adjacent "island," and opening the door of an empty growler, hunched himself up on the floor, and remained concealed until it suited his convenience to descend. Oh! he had been swift, he had been cunning; always he had acted on the assumption that the pursuer was at hand; never for one moment had he relaxed guard, or allowed himself to slow down. Now he was tired, dog tired, but with a glorious fatigue. Not for the world would he have foregone one incident of that most thrilling dash!

Lessing slept, and woke to a fine spring morning. He rang for his newspaper, and turned rapidly over the pages. Nothing had happened. The warning had been delivered in time; the grey old city was undisturbed.

But that night when Lessing returned to his chambers he found a letter awaiting him, addressed in an unknown handwriting. He tore it open, and read the few words which it contained:

"TRAITOR,—The doom which you have delayed, will now fall on your own head. Do not think to escape. The world itself would not be wide enough to hide you. At the moment when you least expect it, your call will come——"

Lessing stood, staring at the written words, and the little room seemed suddenly cold as a cave. He had wished, and his wish had been granted to him. Henceforth, till he died, danger must be his bride!

A man may be brave to the superlative of bravery, yet almost inevitably he will weaken at the consciousness of hidden danger, pursuing him stealthily day after day, week after week, playing with him with ruthless deliberation, as a cat plays with a mouse, setting him free, only to realize

that his torture has been in vain, and the day of reckoning is still to come.

For the first few days after his receipt of the fateful letter, Lessing went about his work with a grim, but not altogether unpleasant, excitement. He realized once for all that it was hopeless to try to hide himself from the Brethren, but he determined to sell his life dearly. He carried a policeman's whistle, and a walking-stick with a large and roughly-cut head, which on occasion could be a formidable weapon. The question of a revolver had been dismissed after the shortest hesitation, seeing that Lessing's inexperience with firearms made such a possession rather an extra danger than a protection. He put his affairs in order, and, like every other man under sentence of death, woke to a smarting consciousness of the sweetness of life. Life and—Delia! Delia of the rose bloom and the misty eyes. Delia, who on occasion could be so maddeningly, tantalizingly alive! Lessing did not realize his own changed looks, and it seemed to him the cruellest contrariety of fate that Delia should show herself at her sweetest and most womanly at this moment when he knew himself separated from her by the most impenetrable of barriers.

A fortnight of incessant, imminent anxiety passed slowly by; then came a night when, taking

his way to the corner house after dinner, Lessing experienced his first tangible alarm. The square was empty of pedestrians; he was walking on the farther side, close to the tall shuttered houses, when through the shrubs behind the railing of the centre enclosure, the lamplight showed a glimpse of a white face peering towards him. The next second it had disappeared, but even as he walked he had a conviction that a crouching figure kept pace behind that leafy screen. He hurried his steps, the figure kept pace; he could hear the rustle of the boughs as it passed, leaping across the intervening spaces with swift, ape-like bounds. Presently, when it reached that thick clump of trees, it would leap ahead, crouch, and take aim. Lessing acted on the impulse of the moment. A doctor's plate shone bright on a doorway—he pealed the electric bell, and a moment later stood safe within the entrance hall.

The doctor found his patient wanting in nervous force, prescribed a tonic, and rose to intimate that the interview was over; then, as the patient failed to take the hint, explained that he himself was obliged to go out at once. His opinion of the gravity of the case was increased when the patient first expressed a wish to accompany him on his walk, and then bade him good night at the first corner!

And that night Delia was kinder than ever and the savour of life more alluringly sweet!

During the days that followed Lessing developed a horror of solitude. The old evenings with a pipe and a book became abhorrent, and on the nights when he did not go to the corner house, he either dined in town or invited a friend to share his home repast. It was therefore with real relief that one Saturday morning he received a telegraphic invitation from a leisured friend who diversified a roving existence by flying visits to his country home. The telegram showed the expansiveness of the man of means, and ran as follows:

"Returning to Moat this afternoon. Try to join me for a week-end. Car will meet four-thirty on chance.—BLAKENEY."

It was impossible to reply, since Blakeney had dispatched his wire from Crewe, and was presumably already travelling southwards. The form of the message showed that no answer was expected, but Lessing had not the shadow of a doubt as to his own acceptance. He was thankful for the chance of leaving London behind, and spending the next two days in Blakeney's cheerful society. He sent a boy home to get his bag, and carry it to the station, and when the hour for departure approached,

followed by a long and devious route, coming on the platform just in time to jump into a moving carriage. By this time he retained little hope of avoiding the espionage of the Brethren, but as his life grew more precious so did his precautions increase, and his determination to fight to the last.

The smoking carriage contained the usual contingent of comfortable middle-aged citizens, and the hour's journey passed without incident. It was a stopping train, and the passengers descended in great numbers at the nearer suburbs, and in scattered units once the hour's limit had passed. Lessing counted six men besides himself who descended at Evershaw, one old, three middle-aged, a young man in seedy brown overcoat, and a workman carrying a bag of tools. They looked one and all reassuringly English and commonplace, and Lessing heaved a sigh of relief. For once he had really escaped the scent! He hurried through the booking office, to find himself confronted by the collection of somewhat broken-down looking gigs and pony carts to be seen at most country stations. There was no sign of Lessing's luxurious car, only a powerful-looking mud-bespattered taxi, beside which stood a man in leather gaiters and a driving-coat. He touched his cap as Lessing approached, saying in an interrogative tone:

"Beg pardon, sir—Mr. Lessing?"

"Yes."

"I have instructions to meet you, sir. From the Moat."

"Right," said Lessing, and handed over his bag. He realized at once that Blakeney had probably wired for his own car to meet him some distance down the line; and he seated himself in the capacious tonneau of the taxi with an agreeable rising of spirits. The little station was gay with spring flowers, and the scent of wallflowers floated refreshingly on the cool clean breeze. Lessing stretched his tired limbs, and drew a deep, grateful breath. He was just in the mood for a spin through country lanes, and for once was tempted to wish that the Moat was situated at a greater distance from the station. Then in a moment his mood changed, and a cloud of anxiety descended. Already the car had made its first movement forward, when the man with the brown coat sprang to the front, and leaped to the seat beside the chauffeur. Scrambling, clutching, he righted himself, steadied his hat on his head, and pressed a tentative touch on a side pocket, and all the time the driver vouchsafed not one glance, but devoted himself to his wheel, as quietly as if it were an everyday occurrence to be boarded at the

last moment by an uninvited "fare." There was something in that stolidity which chilled the blood in Lessing's veins, for it seemed to infer that the incident was *expected;* that the man in the brown coat had travelled down from town for no other purpose than to occupy that special seat.

For the next few minutes Lessing alternated between fear and composure. In the latter condition he told himself that it was a usual occurrence for a country driver to give a "lift" to a friend, and that such an action was tacitly sanctioned by his patrons. Probably the man in the brown coat was so accustomed to avail himself of his friend's hospitality, that to both the action had become automatic. The more Lessing dwelt on this explanation, the more satisfactory did it appear; it supported him to the end of the straggling village, and only lost its power when the car failed to turn up the lane leading to the Moat. He leaned forward, tapped at the dividing glass, and called through the tube, but neither man moved the fraction of an inch. He called again, more loudly than before, and as if answering a signal, the car leaped forward, leaped again, and with ever-mounting speed dashed down the empty lane.

Then the truth could no longer be disguised. These men were in league against him; they had

laid a trap, and he had walked into it with credulous ease. The telegram had been a fraud, sent with no other purpose than to lure him from town, into the solitude of these lonely lanes. The Brethren's knowledge of Blakeney and his ways seemed at first an incredible feat, but a moment's consideration went far to remove the mystery. Blakeney had passed through town only a week before, and had dined with Lessing at his club. Nothing more easy than to discover his name from the porter, and to follow up the scent.

At that moment Lessing would have given much for the feel of a revolver in his coat pocket. Given such a weapon he might have "held up" the two men on the front seat, and forced them to obey his orders; as it was, he was powerless as a child. For another ten minutes the car pursued its headlong rush; the two men sitting silent, immovable, looking neither to right nor left; the man inside crouched forward in an attitude of defence. And once again Lessing was conscious of that tingling in his veins which was rather exhilaration than dread. Face to face with danger he had no lack of courage, rather did every faculty of his being rouse itself to an added fullness of life. The tangible had no terror, it was the passive waiting which played havoc with his nerves.

The car was still racing forward, plunging deeper and deeper into the heart of the country. Lessing studied the road on either side, searching for landmarks which might be registered for future use. He had by now concluded that he was being conveyed to some stronghold of the Brethren where he would meet the fate allotted to him for his betrayal, and he reflected that it would be days if not weeks before his disappearance would attract serious attention. By way of precaution he had burnt Blakeney's telegram as soon as read; while the boy who carried his bag to the station had departed immediately after his own arrival and could give no clue as to his destination. To-night might see the close of his own life, but his friends would pursue the even tenor of their way without a fear for his welfare. Even Delia. . . . With the thought of Delia came a knife-like pang; a determination to strain every nerve and faculty to outwit his enemies.

Another five minutes, and he became aware that the car was slacking speed, that the men on the front seat were looking ahead, as though on the watch for an expected signal. Presumably it came, for with skilful turns of the wheel the chauffeur steered the car down a narrow lane, and, with a second lurching curve,

into a gateway which stood half-way down its length.

So far the manipulation of the car had borne testimony to the skill of the chauffeur, but two sharp turnings so quickly succeeding each other were a severe test, and terminated in a momentary skid over a grassy bank, during which the car tilted violently to the side.

The swing was severe enough to throw Lessing sideways on the seat, and before he had time to right himself, the two men had leaped off the box, the one to the right and the other to the left, and had appeared simultaneously at either door. There was nothing precisely threatening in their demeanour, but they had the air of men who knew their duty, and were prepared to do it. The chauffeur had an appearance of bull-dog strength, but little sign of intelligence. The man in the brown coat had a narrow, hatchet-like face, with keen, alert eyes. The hand which lay on the door of the car was white and well shaped. One glance at him showed that he was the real master of the situation. Lessing looked from one to the other with an air of haughty displeasure.

"May I inquire the explanation of this extraordinary behaviour! I gave instructions to be driven to the Moat."

"Our instructions were to bring you here. You are expected. I must ask you to get out, and come up to the house."

It was the man in the brown coat who spoke. He came a step nearer as he spoke, blocking the doorway; the chauffeur held open the farther door, his great bulk outlined against the green of the trees. It seemed to Lessing that for the moment his best policy was to obey, since, if it came to a fight, he preferred the open to his present cramped position. He alighted then without demur, and, stood on the path stretching himself, and looking around with an air of assurement which he was far from feeling. He saw a garden which even in its spring freshness looked desolate and neglected, and, some forty yards from the gate, a low house of grey stone, thickly covered with creepers, the branches of which had been allowed to drape the windows so heavily that in many cases the glass was almost entirely concealed. Lessing looked at it and felt a creeping of the blood. There was only one word which could fitly describe the appearance of that house, and it was a word of which he did not care to think. It was a dead house.

Lessing had been under the impression that while he had been studying his surroundings he had been standing still, but it now appeared that

unconsciously to himself, and impelled by the movements of the men on either side, he had been slowly approaching nearer and nearer the open door of the windowless house. Instantly he halted and put a sharp inquiry:

"What is this house? Who is it that is 'expecting' me, as you say?"

"You will recognize him when you meet," said the man in brown, and pursing his lips gave a soft, prolonged whistle, repeated three times over, with a perceptible pause between each. He looked towards the house meantime, and in imagination Lessing filled the blank space of the doorway with a dreaded figure, the figure of a man with black hair turning to grey, a shaggy beard, and large prominent teeth. He had need of all his courage at that moment, but he made no resistance as the men by his side steadily guided him forward; for just as a short time before he had preferred to fight in the open, now he was possessed with a desire to find himself in a room where he might take his stand against the wall, and so force his enemies to a frontal attack.

The three men entered a narrow, absolutely bare hallway, from which an uncarpeted staircase rose sharply to the left. From the first glance around, and even more from the dank and mouldy atmos-

phere, Lessing divined that the house had long been unoccupied, and that a deed of violence committed therein might remain undiscovered for an indefinite period. The conclusion did not help to raise his spirits as he entered a long narrow room facing the back of the house, his companions meantime pressing hard on his wake.

The room was as empty as the hall; the man in the brown coat walked quickly to the nearer of the two windows, gave a searching glance around, then turned to the chauffeur with a significant shake of the head. There followed a moment's pause, as though both men were puzzled by the absence of someone confidently expected. Then the man with the brown coat turned once more to Lessing.

"I must ask you to wait for us here for a few minutes," he said courteously. "We will not keep you longer than is necessary. I am sorry that I cannot offer you a chair. This house is, as you see, unfurnished."

Lessing did not condescend to reply. He hailed the departure of the two men as giving him an opportunity to examine his surroundings and find a possible way of escape. The room was on the ground floor, the windows were unbarred, surely then it would be easy.

The next moment the blood rushed to his face,

as his ears caught the turn of a rusty key, followed by the drawing of a bolt, and hurrying across the floor he found that the door leading into the passage had been doubly secured. The two men were determined to keep him a prisoner while they waited for the appearance of one who was evidently their chief; he could hear their footsteps ascending the stairs, tramping over the bare floors above; once and again the sound of the long thrice-repeated whistle came to his ears, but to his relief there came no answer to the signal.

Lessing stood with his ears to the chink of the door listening intently. Presently he heard the two men descend to the hall, linger for a minute as if undecided, then pass out of the front door. Another minute and a new sound broke the stillness; he listened acutely, and had little difficulty in divining its meaning; the men were endeavouring to move the car out of the rut, so that at any moment it might be ready to bear them away.

Instantly Lessing darted to the nearer of the two windows, and looking out experienced an unwelcome surprise. The house was evidently built on shelving ground, for though the room in which he stood was level with the entrance, it was yet raised by a good twenty feet from the ground at the back. Now twenty feet is not a great depth,

but it is too far for a man to drop without risk of at least spraining an ankle, and thereby leaving himself helpless in the hands of his enemies, especially when, as was the case in this instance, the ground is paved with rough, uneven flags. Lessing drew back in disgust, and darted to the window on the farther end of the room. Here, if anything, the drop was greater, but the position was improved, inasmuch as a tangle of grass took the place of the jagged flags. The window was of the old-fashioned casement description, and to prise open the rusty latch was no light task even for strong fingers, but it was done at last, and Lessing hung forward, listening breathlessly to the sounds from the front of the house. The car was evidently still refusing to budge; he could hear the voice of the chauffeur instructing the man in the brown coat as to his share in the work, and the thud of the engine as once and again it strained to the task.

Now was his time, while the two men were engaged; while as yet the third man had not appeared! Lessing hung out of the window, his eyes sweeping the wall to right and left. He had a strong head, and given so much as a drain pipe would have no hesitation in essaying the descent, but the mass of ivy hid everything from view. Lessing hoisted himself on the window-sill, and

creeping first to one side and then the other, groped among the leaves. He found no pipe, but a moment's searching discovered what was quite as useful for his purpose, a central branch of the ivy itself, thick as a man's fist, strong enough to support a dozen climbers. Lessing gave himself no time to think, but lowered himself from the sill, grasped the branch in both hands, and began his descent. It was not as easy as he had expected, for the branch scalloped along the walls, in a somewhat disconcerting manner, but given a steady head, and a body in reasonable training, there were no serious difficulties to encounter, and a point was soon reached when he could relax his hold, and drop softly to the ground.

So far all had gone with almost incredible ease, but Lessing was aware that he was not yet out of the wood. At any moment his escape might be discovered, and his pursuers would have a double advantage in their possession of the car and their knowledge of the country itself. It was the work of a few minutes to dart down the overgrown path, scale the wall at the end of the garden, and drop upon the grass below, but the next step was more difficult to decide. Looking around him he perceived a white roadway curling like a ribbon round a sweep of meadow land, and realized how easily

his escape might be cut off. It flashed into his mind that his best chance was to lie low until his pursuers had started on their chase, and even as the thought passed through his brain, his eye fell on a straggling growth of barberry against the outer side of the wall he had just scaled. The bushes were small and by no means thick, so that at first sight they offered no promise of shelter, but on further examination Lessing discovered that the ground between them and the wall was hollowed to the depth of a foot or more, and covered with a mass of tall grasses. Here, then, was an ideal hiding-place, where he could lie low and know all that was happening around.

Without a moment's hesitation Lessing laid himself down in the hollow, pressing back the grasses that he might creep close to the shelter of the wall, then allowing them to spring back to their original position. His tweed suit was of a nondescript tint, the shade least likely to catch the eye, but for greater safety he picked handfuls of leaves and grass, and scattered them over his clothes, then lying flat with face hidden on his folded arms, he awaited the discovery of his escape.

He had time to grow cramped and chill before the sound of loud raised voices and the heavy

tramp of feet over wooden floors warned him that the search had begun. Almost immediately afterwards someone came racing down the garden path, circled round once and again, and finally clambered to the top of the wall, to obtain a view over the outlying country. Lessing knew by the distinctness of the sound that the ascent had been made at but a short distance from where he lay, and the knowledge sent a chill through his blood. It had not occurred to him that his hiding-place could be viewed from above, and he waited in the keenest suspense, prepared to take to his feet and make a dash for it, at the first hint of discovery. But the man on the wall made no such sign. He breathed in short, gasping breaths, as a man would breathe under stress of agitation, and between his breaths once and again he sent out the old whistling summons, then scrambling, clutching, he fell back into the garden, and again raced to and fro among the curving paths.

For the next ten minutes the sounds of the search continued to reach Lessing's ears, then came the welcome thudding of the engine, as the car swept out of the gate, showing that the men had abandoned the search of the premises. Another ten minutes, and the thudding sounded again, but from another direction, and peering cautiously

between the branches, Lessing could watch the car approach down the long curve of the road encircling the meadows. It was running slowly now, its occupants no doubt engaged in searching the flat stretch of land, making sure of one direction after another in which their prisoner could not have escaped. Presently it turned and slowly traversed the same space, before it finally returned to the high road and disappeared from sight.

The dusk had fallen before Lessing crept out of his hiding-place, and dragged his stiffened limbs across the meadows. He had determined to avoid the highways, and so wandered on without any idea of the direction in which he was going, but after half an hour's walking, to his joy and relief he struck a railway line, and following it soon arrived at a country station.

At ten o'clock that night Lessing let himself into his rooms, dusty, dirty, incredibly fatigued, the poorer by the loss of a bag containing two quite admirable suits of clothes, but full of thankfulness and relief.

For once at least he had beaten the Brethren on their own ground!

"It's no good pretending. It's no good trying to deceive me. You *are* changed!" Delia de-

clared, nodding her pretty head with solemn emphasis. "You are changing more and more every single day. And it doesn't suit you. Hollows in the cheeks! What business has a man of thirty with hollows in his cheeks? And a different expression in your eyes. Worried, absent, scared. Valentine Lessing,—what have you been and gone and done?"

Lessing was seated once more in the delightfully homely room at the corner house, enjoying the rare treat of a *tête-à-tête* with Delia. The men of the family were out, and two minutes before the maid had announced "Mrs. Wright from the District," and "Could the mistress possibly see her?" whereupon Mrs. Gordon had sighed, and said: "He is out of work again, and she *is* such a talker! Delia, dear, will you go? Give her half-a-crown, and say I'm tired." But Delia, as a rule the most helpful of daughters, resolutely refused.

"No, mother; it's your duty. The vicar says you give far too much. It's pandering, and makes it hard for the other visitors. Besides, I'd *never* get rid of her! Be a good, brave lady, and do your duty."

So Mrs. Gordon had departed, when Delia immediately turned to Lessing, and announced triumphantly:

"She won't be back for a good half-hour! I've been longing for a chance of talking to you alone," and proceeded to cross-question as before stated. "Yes, you *are* scared." Delia repeated. "When anyone enters the room suddenly you jump and look round as if you expected to see a policeman and a pair of handcuffs. It makes me quite nervous even to watch you. And," her voice sank to a deeper note, "you look ill, Val! *What is it?*"

Lessing bent forward in his chair, his hands clasped loosely together between his knees; there was a look in his eyes which brought the colour surging into Delia's cheeks.

"I can tell you honestly, Delia, that I have done nothing to make me fear a policeman or handcuffs, but—I *am* worried!" For a passing moment he struggled with the temptation to confess the truth, but this point had been mentally argued time and again, always with the same conclusion. To confide his story would be to include his confidante in his own danger, since it was hardly possible that he would not feel called upon to take active steps against the Brethren. "I can't tell you the why and wherefore, I wish I could, but I can assure you that I have no cause to be ashamed."

"Oh, bother ashamed!" cried Delia hotly. "*Why* are you scared? Has anyone been—er—nasty to you, Val? A man in the office—jealous of you because you have got on so well. Forged a cheque and pretended it was you, or put money in your drawer like they do in books, you know, when they have a grudge? Is it something like that, and you are afraid in case they suspect you and send you away?"

The words were so deliciously naïve and girlish that Lessing was obliged to laugh; they were also so transparently eloquent of the speaker's interest and concern for himself that a great pang rent his heart at the vision of life as it might be. Life with Delia—with Delia's children, a happy, breezy, family life, repeating the atmosphere of the corner house in some flowery suburban cottage. Oh, how good it seemed, how full and satisfying! What a joy to a tired man to have that haven to which to return at the close of his day's work. Time had been when he had scoffed at the smug security of suburban life; had pitied the lot of the man who spent his evenings playing with his children and mowing a miniature lawn, but in the light of the last month's experience, he asked nothing better of fate than to find himself in a precisely similar position.

"No, Delia, no!" he cried ardently, "there is no business trouble. It's—er—something outside. Don't speak of it, please. I want to tell you, and I ought not. It's dear and sweet of you to care. I can't tell you how much it has meant to me the last few weeks, just to be able——"

Delia interrupted hurriedly, after the manner of young women who ardently long to hear a declaration of love, yet take fright at the first symptom of its approach.

"Anyway," she said decisively, "you have *got* to come to the cottage over Whitsuntide. I insist upon it, so it's no use trying to escape. Three whole days in the country will steady your nerves. It's not at all *comme il faut* for a director to have jumpy nerves. If I were a shareholder I'd sell out at once. You will travel down with us on Friday afternoon, and stay as long as you can the next week. Understand?"

Lessing thankfully accepted the invitation, which was duly confirmed by Mrs. Gordon upon her return to the sitting-room, and a week later he arrived at the week-end cottage, after a safe and comfortable journey in the company of his cheerful friends.

During that week only one disquieting incident had happened, but that was ominous enough. A

typed envelope lying among other letters on the breakfast-table was left carelessly until the others had been read and digested, and then torn open with the scant courtesy shown to notes of the circular type; but the folded slip bore no printed words, and as Lessing jerked it apart there floated downward on to the carpet a thin powdery stream, at sight of which the blood mounted in his face. Moistening one finger, he bent and applied the tip to the scattered grains, then lifted it to his lips. Salt! There was no mistaking the sharp clean savour, and on a corner of the paper he beheld the rough amateur drawing of a knife.

The Brethren had sent him a reminder that they were still waiting for their revenge!

That year Whitsuntide fell in a spell of warm and settled weather, and a more charming retreat than the Gordons' week-end cottage it would be difficult to find. The house was a type of simple comfort, the garden a delicious riot of colour and fragrance. None of the Gordons knew anything about the science of gardening, but they considered it "fun" to attend to their own garden, sent wholesale orders to advertising seedsmen, and begged shamelessly from gardening friends. The friends responded with sacks of mysterious-looking roots which the Gordons proceeded to plump indiscrim-

inately into the first vacant space which came handy. Everything flourished, for the soil was new and rich, and the sun blazed upon it from morning till night; and the result was as delightful as it was unorthodox.

After a day spent in the cottage, Lessing began to feel that the happenings of the last weeks must surely be the creation of his own brain. The mental atmosphere by which he was surrounded was so kindly and wholesome, so pre-eminently *sane*, that, in contrast, the wild deeds of the Brethren seemed more the vagaries of a dream than cold actual fact. Most thankfully he accepted the peaceful breathing space, and for the first time since the incident of the spilling of the salt went about his way free from apprehension. It seemed to him in the last degree unlikely that the Brethren would choose a time when he was in close contact with friends for the execution of their revenge.

Lessing had made a compact with himself that under no circumstances would he speak of love to Delia Gordon. He knew now that he had loved her for years, he realized that under his present circumstances it would be a despicable act to seek to bind her in any way, but, with the extraordinary logic practised by men in affairs of the heart, he believed that so long as he refrained from an actual

declaration he was acting as an honourable man. It did not occur to him that in the event of his own sudden death a woman who loved him would find her best comfort in the knowledge that her love had been returned!

But the days passed pleasantly. Mr. and Mrs. Gordon were the kindest of hosts, Terence showed himself at his best, and Delia, in her light dresses and flower-wreathed hats, was the most tantalizingly pretty creature in the world. Lessing found it very difficult to keep his resolve as he sat by her side in a summer-house situated at a discreet distance from the house, and screened by the thick belt of trees which formed the end of the shrubbery; and, if the truth is to be told, Delia intended him to find it difficult, and made special play with her eyelashes to that effect. Val was looking infinitely better, but when he returned to town that tiresome "worry" would begin again, and she wanted, as any nice, right-minded girl would have wanted, to have the right to comfort and support.

"So sorry you can't stay over to-morrow! It's so stupid to rush back to town just when you are beginning to get good. Why can't you make a week of it while you are here? Only three more days."

"I'm afraid I can't. It's been awfully jolly. I've enjoyed every minute of the time, but—er—I don't think I ought. Business, you know!"

Delia was annoyed, and showed it.

"Awfully boring it must be, to be a City man," said she with her nose in the air. "Always having to keep your nose to the grind. That's why I like army men. You can depend upon them. I shall telegraph to Captain Rawle, and ask him to take your place. He'll jump at it."

"Conceited ass!" muttered Lessing under his breath. He looked at Delia and saw beneath her pretence of indifference a mistiness of eye, a tremor at the corner of the lips, the meaning of which was plain even to his obtuse masculine senses, and at the sight his prudence fled to the winds.

"Delia!" he cried rapturously. "Delia! Oh, my darling, do you mean to say that you *care?* Delia, does it matter to you whether I go or stay? Do you really, really mean to say——"

"I—I didn't say anything—I—I—*of course,* I care! Oh, Val, you *are* stupid!" cried Delia, putting up two white hands to hide an exceedingly red face. Val knew a rapturous moment as he bent to take those hands in his, but, even as he moved, a warning rustle sounded from the bushes ahead, and he straightened himself in expectation

of the advent of an intruder. And then, at that moment, with a spasm of fear freezing his hot blood, he saw once more the face of his enemy. While one might have counted six, it glared at him from between the branches—the swarthy, bearded face, with the tufted eyebrows, and the strong, protuberant teeth. For six long seconds the eyes gazed mockingly into his own.

Poor palpitating Delia, peeping between her fingers, beheld her lover of a moment transformed into a stricken, grey-faced man, who sat huddled up on his seat, staring before him with a gaze of helpless despair. There was no more blushing and trembling after that—Delia simply wrapped her arms round his neck, and crooned over him with tender, loving words.

"Val, my own Val. What is it? I'm here. Delia's here. Nobody shall hurt you, dearest; no one shall harm you. Delia's here. Look at me, Val—my own, own Val!"

The words pierced. Through all the horror and the fear, their sweetness reached to the brain, and turned the current of his thoughts. One look he gave her, a look of passionate gratitude and love, then to her utter bewilderment he lifted her to her feet and drew her to the entrance of the summer-house.

"Go, darling—go! Go quickly! You can help me best that way. Go quickly!"

Delia stared at him, and a sudden explanation leaped into her brain. Heart disease! Val had discovered that his heart was affected, that was the reason of his changed looks. At the moment he was threatened with a spasm of pain, and man-like preferred to be alone. Obediently Delia walked away, her heart torn with sympathy. But when they were married she would take such good care of him, such incessant, all-encompassing care, that he must, he should get well!

Lessing watched her go, and then deliberately moved a chair to the centre of the entrance to the summer-house, seated himself astride, and bent his head on the rail.

He had no longer the wish to fight for his life. Better a thousand times that the end should come now, rather than later on. He was ready. He was waiting. He prayed that there would not be long to wait. At the hour when he least expected it his call had come!

. . . . . .

"Now then, old fellow, now then! Sit up, will you? What's the matter with you? That's right—that's right. Keep your hair on, old man. You're not half as bad as you think you are!"

Terence Gordon's breezy voice boomed in Lessing's ear. Terence's big hands laid hold of him, turned him round on his chair, and pressed him back against its rails. His good-humoured face puckered with concern as he met the blank stare in the man's eyes, and he continued to pour forth a stream of slangy reassurements, the while Lessing slowly regained his composure. He could not have told whether it was ten seconds or ten hours during which he had sat waiting for death, but so utterly had he lost touch with the things of earth that it was only by degrees that he could realize that he was still alive and unharmed, and that this singularly earthly young man was seated by his side, ragging him for his mysterious exhibition of funk.

"Got 'em again—eh, what?" said Terence severely. "Tell you what, you gave me a touch myself, when you leaped upon me like that. Steady, old man. Steady! What's it all about?"

"Terence," said Lessing thickly, "go back to the house. Look after your sister. I—I am going away. I can't stay. I'm bringing danger upon her, upon you all—I can't explain. I—I've been warned——"

"Strikes me," said Terence slowly. "Strikes me, if there's any taking care of Delia to be done,

it's your business to do it. Hardly playing the game is it, to run away just at this point?"

"For Heaven's sake, don't torture me," cried Lessing wildly. "How can you judge? You don't understand. You don't understand——"

"Strikes me very forcibly, my dear fella," said Terence once more, "that it's *you* that don't understand!" He thrust his arm round the corner of the summer-house, and produced the small black bag, which he was wont to carry on his expeditions to hospital. He placed the bag on the table, and seated himself before it with an air of intense enjoyment. "Just keep your eye on your uncle, my lad, and we'll see if he can help you to understand!"

And then, calmly, complacently, in the full light of day, that medical student produced from that bag—first, a wig of black hair powdered with grey; secondly, a beard; thirdly, a pair of tufted eyebrows; fourthly a curious arrangement of wire clips connecting four large teeth; and fifthly, a bottle containing a brown fluid or dye.

Calmly, composedly, in the full light of day, did that medical student don one after the other: the wig, beard, eyebrows, and teeth, and dab an illustrative patch of brown on either cheek. Then folding his arms after the manner of the villain in British melodrama, he hissed forth the words which

had rung ceaselessly in Lessing's ears for the last six weeks:

"Tr-r-r-aitor! The doom which you have postponed shall fall upon your own head. At the hour when you least——"

Lessing seized his arm in a grip of steel.

"Silence! Terence, what does this mean? Do you dare to tell me that it was *you* who has made my life a torture all these——"

But Terence was not to be daunted. He twitched his arm away, and defended himself with his usual energy.

"What's that—*torture?* What do *you* mean by talking of torture? Weren't you forever grousing about the dullness of life, and bemoaning yourself because you couldn't have a taste of excitement? Weren't you forever gassing about the thrill of danger, and boasting of your adventurer's blood? Ought to be jolly thankful to me for giving you a taste of the real gen-u-ine article! I dare you to say I didn't do it uncommonly well, too. Very friendly action, I call it. You needed someone to bring you to your senses. Mooning along, spoiling your own life, and er—er— Hang it all—she *is* my sister!" concluded Terence with a touch of righteous indignation.

Lessing sat staring, a picture of stupefaction.

The words were understandable enough; he heard them with his ears, but his brain refused to take in the meaning.

"*You!* It was you? *You* came into that restaurant, sat at my table—spilled that salt?"

"I did. I'd had one or two shots before that, but they didn't come off, but the salt was a fair catch. You'd spun us that yarn more than once—forgot that, didn't you? So I tried it, and you caught on like an eel. The rest was as easy as falling off a log. Where else should you go but Scotland Yard? I went on in advance, watched you out, and trotted along in the rear, waiting for a suitable moment to give you another thrill. Then I went home to bed! Got home a little quicker than you did that night, sonny, I fancy! What?"

The rush of anger and humiliation which came at the remembrance of that two hours of laborious dodging and turning did more to revive Lessing than any amount of reassurement. He set his teeth, and continued the cross-examination.

"And that night in the Square."

"Hang it, yes! That was me, all right. I'd wasted four evenings hanging about, so I felt pretty murderous that night. Pretty good sport, though, to see you bolt into that doctor's place. How I

did laugh! By the way, did you take the physic he ordered?"

Lessing gave him a steely glance.

"And the message, the telegram from Blakeney? You sent that, of course, and arranged with that car."

"Just so. Ye–es. That was, as you might say, my *tour de force!*" said Terence, smirking. "Cost me a lot of fag, that did, to say nothing about coin of the realm. Thought you were fairly caught that time, didn't you? What about 'The Thrill' when you heard the sound of the key in the lock? Eh, what?"

Lessing gave him a murderous glance.

"How would you have felt if I had injured myself for life, climbing down from that window?"

"Oh, shucks!" Terence shrugged with easy assurance. "Any juggins could have got down over that ivy, easy as walking downstairs. And you have done a bit of climbing in your day. Did you get very much stung by the nettles lying down by that wall?"

Lessing's jaw fell; the blood buzzed in his ears. An intolerable humiliation encompassed him. Had he been *seen?*

Terence burst into a great roar of laughter.

"Oh, bless you, yes! He saw you right enough.

It was Jeffries, you know. G. P. Jeffries, sharpest fellow we have at hospital. He said he had the time of his life, sitting upon that wall, watching you quaking among those nettles. By the way, the bag's all right. I've got it locked away in my cupboard. I suppose you wouldn't be willing, as a slight acknowledgment of my trouble, and in gratitude for an uncommonly useful lesson, to regard the outlay on that day's expedition as a—er, fee?"

Lessing stared, glared, opened his lips to pour out heated words, stopped short, and expanded his chest in a long, deep breath. Suddenly, overpoweringly, the consciousness of safety rushed through his being, and swept before it all petty considerations for his own dignity and self-esteem. He was free, he was safe; his life was unthreatened, he was free to plan ahead, to take upon himself new claims, new responsibilities. He felt again the touch of Delia's arms, and knew an irresistible impatience to continue the interrupted scene.

He rose from his seat, and addressed a few dignified words to the lad by his side.

"Another time, Terence, we'll thrash this matter out. You meant well, no doubt, but——"

"Just so. I was sorry to interrupt, but it was all done for the best. She's in the rose

garden. She's crying!" volunteered Terence, grinning.

. . . . . .

"Is it your heart? *Is* it your heart?" cried Delia clinging to his arm. "Oh, Val, is your heart really affected?"

Lessing clasped her to him, laughing a big, glad laugh, full of the joy and wonder of life.

"It is, darling!" he cried. "It is! *You* have affected it. Oh, Delia, Delia, let's be married, let's be married at once, and—keep a chicken farm!"

IX

THE MAN WHO WISHED FOR SUCCESS

SUCCESS was the passion of John Malham's life, mediocrity was his bane. The ordinary commonplace life which brings happiness and content to millions of his fellow men filled him with a passion of disgust. As he left the Tube station morning and night, and filed out into the street among the crowd of black-coated, middle-class workers, an insignificant unit in an insignificant whole, a feeling of physical nausea overcame him. There were grey-haired men by the hundred among the throng, men not only elderly, but old, working ceaselessly day by day at the same dull grind, returning at night to small houses in the suburbs. From youth to age they had toiled and expended their strength, and this was their reward! In a few years' time they would die, and be buried, and the great machine would grind on, oblivious of their loss. Slaves, puppets, automata who were content to masquerade in the guise of men! John Malham squared

his great shoulders and drew a deep breath of contempt. Not for him this dull path of monotony. By one means or another, he had vowed to his own heart to rise to the top of the tree, and make for himself a place among men.

Malham was a barrister by profession; a barrister, without influence, and with a private income of a hundred a year. His impressive personality, and unmistakable gift of argument had brought him a moderate success, but while others congratulated him, his own feeling was an ever-mounting discontent. He was waiting for the grand opportunity, and the grand opportunity did not come. Like an actor who finds no scope for his talent in the puny parts committed to his charge, but feels ever burning within him the capacity to shine as a star, so did Malham fret and chafe; intolerantly waiting for his chance.

As an outlet for his energies Malham had plunged into politics, and here success had been more rapid. As an apt and powerful speaker he was much in request, and his circle of influential acquaintances grew apace. He was asked to dinner, on visits to country houses where he was entertained with cordiality, as a *quid pro quo* for a speech at the County Hall. Politicians began to say to him with a smile: "We must have you in the

House, Malham." "I shall be speaking for *you* another day, Malham!" "A man like you, Malham, ought to be in the Cabinet." Steadily, slowly, the conviction had generated that in politics lay his best hope of success.

But he must have money. Even in the days of paid members a man without private means was handicapped in the race. Once again he could not be content to be a unit in a crowd. He wished to be known; to make himself felt. To do this it would be necessary to entertain, to have a home of which he could be proud. A home, and—a wife.

At this point Malham's hard face would soften into the tender, humorous smile which was reserved for but one person on earth—for Celia Bevan, a high school mistress to whom he had been engaged for five long years. Few of his friends, and none of his acquaintances, had heard of his engagement, for Malham was a secretive man, and Celia was not in his own set. He had met her on a fishing holiday when they happened to be staying in the same small inn, and for the first and only time in his life had been carried away on a wave of impulse.

Five years ago, and—this was the extraordinary thing!—his heart had never regretted the madness. Celia was poor, unknown, getting perilously near

thirty, but there was an ageless charm about Celia, an ever-new, ever-changing, ever-lovable charm, which held him captive, despite the cold remonstrances of his brain. Nowadays he met dozens of wealthy and distinguished women, but no duchess in her purple had for him the charm of Celia in her shabby blouses, seated in her shabby lodging, wrestling with the everlasting pile of exercise books.

She loved him—heavens! how she loved him. There was nothing tepid about Celia. Even eight years' teaching at a high school had been powerless to beat down her individuality, or damp the ardour of her spirit. She loved him with a passion which was her very being, and he loved her in return as devotedly as it was in his nature to love. She was his mate, the one woman in the world who could understand, and sympathize, and console.

But—there was Lady Anne! Lady Anne was the unmarried daughter of his most influential political patron, and of late it had been impossible for Malham to disguise from himself the fact that Lady Anne had fallen a victim to his powerful personality and clever, versatile tongue. She was a pitiful creature, this scion of a noble house, a thin, wizened woman of thirty-seven, plain with a dull, sexless plainness which had in it no redeeming

point, so diffident as to be almost uncouth in manner, overwhelmed with the consciousness of her own social failure. Wealthy and influential as was her family, no one had ever wished to marry "poor Anne," yet hidden within the unattractive exterior lived a loving, sensitive heart, which had gone hungry from the hour of her birth.

Now as it happened Lady Anne's brother was nursing a certain constituency in the neighbourhood of his father's place, and being neither clever nor fluent he was thankful to avail himself of the services of an eloquent young barrister, who was ever ready to run down from town for a few days' visit, and deliver a rousing address in furtherance of his cause. So it came about that during the summer and autumn John Malham was a frequent visitor at Horne Castle, and at each visit the secret of Lady Anne became more and more apparent to the eyes of onlookers.

Lady Anne wished to marry Malham. Her father recognized as much, and decided resignedly that for "poor Anne" no better match could be expected. Malham was a gentleman, came of a good stock, and—given a start—was the type of man who was bound to come to the front. "We could find him a seat," the Earl said to his son, "and Anne's jointure would keep them going till

he found his feet. If he proposes for her, there'll be no trouble from me. At this time of day we must be thankful for what we can get."

Cautiously, guardedly, in after-dinner confidences the young man was allowed to infer that the coast was clear. At first he had thrust aside the suggestion with a laugh, as something preposterous and impossible, but the poison worked. He began to dally with the thought, to project himself into an imaginary future when the circumstances of life should make in his favour, instead of acting as a handicap. Slowly and surely the poison worked.

One evening he took his way to Grosvenor Square in a frame of mind bordering on desperation. For months past he had been building on the possibility of securing a brief in a case which promised to afford one of the sensations of the year. He had a chance, a promising chance it had appeared, but that afternoon he had received the news that the brief had gone past him in favour of another man, no whit more capable than himself. There were reasons for the choice of which he was ignorant, but in his morbid depression, the only explanation lay in his own insignificance, in the higher social standing of his rival. He had known many such disappointments, and had smarted beneath them, but this was the final straw which

broke down his remaining strength, and as it chanced he was left alone with Lady Anne after dinner, and she ventured a timid question as to the cause of his depression.

Of what happened next he had no clear recollection; he answered, and she sympathized, faltered out a wish that she might help; he thanked her, and—what did he say next? He could not remember, but he knew that he had accepted the offered help, and with it the hand of the donor.

There were tears in Lady Anne's eyes as she plighted her troth. It was the one desire of her heart to share his life. He was the most wonderful, the most gifted of men. To be able to smooth his way would be the proudest privilege which the world could afford. She held out her thin hand as she spoke, and Malham pressed it in his own, and bent over it in elaborate acknowledgment. The chill of those fingers struck to his heart; he left the house and, walking along the streets, the question clamoured insistently at his heart:

Would she expect him to kiss her?

He had made an early retreat, and now went straight to Celia's lodgings. It was part of the strength of his character that he never deferred a difficult duty, and to-night he knew himself faced with the most painful ordeal of his life.

Celia was sitting as usual before a pile of exercise books in her shabby little parlor. Her white blouse was mended in several places, but it was daintily fresh, and her auburn hair flamed into gold beneath the hanging lamp. She did not rise as he entered, but tilted herself back on her chair, and stretched her tired arms with a sigh of welcome.

"Oh, dearest and best, is that you? Oh, how lovely it is when you don't expect, and the good things come! I was never more happy to see you. . . Kiss me several times!"

But he stood stiff and straight on the shabby hearth-rug, and delivered himself of his message:

"I am going to marry Lady Anne Mulliner."

Celia rose from the chair, and seated herself on the side of the table. She had grey eyes fringed with dark lashes, and a large, well-shaped mouth with lips which tilted agreeably at the corners what time she was amused. They tilted now, and the grey eyes danced. Malham was jesting in the good old way in which he used to jest before he grew so silent and preoccupied. It had pleased them then to make believe, and act little plays for the other's benefit. How good it was to jest again!

Celia hunched her shoulders to her ears, and

pointed at him with a dramatic finger. Her voice rang in loud, stagey accents:

"False caitiff, wouldst thou indeed betray my innocent trust? Full many a year have I waited in love and fealty, and wouldst thou spurn the poor maiden's heart?" She pulled her handkerchief out of her belt, flourished it to her eyes, then suddenly subsided into laughter, and an easy: "The poor old scarecrow! Jack! it's not kind. . . What about that kiss?"

"I am going to marry Lady Anne Mulliner," repeated Malham once more. Celia put her head on one side, and looked at him with her winsome look, the look he most loved to see.

"All right, ducky doo! Why shouldn't you? She'll be *most* pleased. But for to-night, you see, you belong to me, and—er—I haven't seen you for three whole days!"

"Celia, you must believe me. I mean it. I proposed to Lady Anne an hour ago, and she accepted me. We are engaged. I came straight here to tell you."

The smile faded from Celia's face. She looked startled and grave, but there was no serious alarm on her face.

"Jack—why?"

He threw out his arms with a gesture of despair.

"Because I can't endure this life. I've missed that case; it has gone past me as usual, to a fellow with influence. There is no hope for a man who has no position, no one behind. It would drive me mad to go on year after year with this hopeless struggle. It is driving me mad now. To-night I felt desperate. I would have given anything in the world to buy my chance, and the opportunity came. I took it. I had not the power to refuse."

"Poor Jack!" she said softly. "Poor Jack!"

He had expected reproaches, tears, wild protestations. Celia was impetuous by nature, and the peace between them had not been unbroken by storms. He was prepared for violence, but this gentleness played havoc with his composure. His face twitched, he turned towards her with passionate entreaty.

"Celia, I'm a brute, a coward. Nothing that you can say of me is bad enough. You've been an angel, and I know, I knew all the time that I hurt you by delaying our marriage. You would have been satisfied with a small beginning; it was I who was not content. I've kept you waiting year after year, and now at the end I have sold myself to another woman."

"You can't sell what is not your own. You

can't *give* what is not your own. You belong to me. I'm not going to give you up!"

She rose, and going up to him clasped both hands round his arm. Her face was white, but she smiled still; on her pale cheek a dimple dipped and waned.

"You were tired and depressed. You saw the chance, and for a moment it seemed the easiest way, but you can't do it, Jack; you can't do it! There's something else that you had forgotten. There's *me!* You love me, Jack."

She raised her face to his with a wooing smile, and a groan burst from his lips. This was torture. His heart was torn, but his resolution remained unchanged.

"Heaven knows I do. You are the only woman I can ever love. I love you more dearly than anything on earth. Except one!"

"And that?"

"Myself. Success. The career that Lady Anne can give——"

"Poor Jack!" sighed Celia again. She leaned her head on his shoulder with her old movement of confiding love. For five long years those broad shoulders had been her resting-place, a bulwark between herself and the outer world. She drew him with her to the sofa, and rested there now. It was impossible to thrust her away.

"If you loved another woman, darling, if you had grown tired of me, I'd let you go without a word. I'd *want* you to go, but I'm not going to let you spoil your life. I haven't loved you all these years without knowing your faults as well as your virtues. The outside world sees your cleverness and charm, but the best in you, the very best Jack—that belongs to me! If you lost me, it would die. There'd be nothing left but the husk of John Malham. The cold, hard husk with nothing inside."

"You may be right, Celia. I expect you are right, but I have made my choice. You can't understand, no woman could understand how men can put ambition before love, but they do it. It is done every day. I don't say I shall not suffer—you know I shall suffer!" His voice broke suddenly. "Celia, *darling!*"

She was silent for a moment, lying motionless against his heart, then she spoke in a soft murmur of reminiscent tenderness.

"D'you remember, Jack, the evening we were engaged? You walked about all night because you were afraid you might go to sleep and think it was a dream, and you scribbled a letter in pencil beneath a lamp-post, and put it into the letter-box so that I might have it at breakfast.

I've got it yet—in tissue paper, to keep the pencil fresh."

"Celia—don't! You torture me. Of course I remember."

"D'you remember that day up the river when we quarrelled, and I cried all over the tea? When I got home at night my face was all smudged. I'd been handling the kettle, and then dried my eyes, and you had never said a word about it, but had been so *lovely* to me all the way home. I *did* love you for that, Jack!"

"I had made you cry to start with. I've made you cry too often. Don't cry for me now, Celia! I'm not worth it. You will be better without me."

Then for the first time there came a flash of anger. She sat up suddenly and faced him with flashing eyes.

"How *dare* you say it? How dare you say such a lie? *Without* you—? What would be left to me if you went? You *are* my life. There has been no room for anyone else; you have demanded everything for yourself,—all my care, all my thought, all interest, all my love,—and I have given them to you, till there is nothing left, and I am powerless to live alone. You know it is true!"

"You think so now, Celia, but you will find life

easier without me. This hopeless waiting is hard on a woman, and I've drawn on you all these years, always asking, always needing. It's a wrench, but it will be better for us both. Celia, I haven't given you up without a struggle. I make no defence. I know I am treating you abominably, but this thing is stronger than myself. I *cannot* go on. I must go my own way."

"I will *never* give you up!" said Celia firmly. She held out her left hand the third finger of which was encircled by the engagement ring, an inexpensive trifle in turquoise and pearls. "You put that ring there, and made me swear that it should never come off until the wedding-ring was put in its place. It never shall! It's no use giving me back my promise. You don't realize what you are asking. It is an impossibility. I can never believe that you seriously intend to marry another woman until I see her walking out of church on your arm. And then——"

"Then——"

"It would kill me, Jack. I could not live."

Malham rose hastily, and strode across the room. His endurance was at an end. Of what use to prolong the agony? His mind was made up, it was useless to go on torturing Celia and himself.

"It is too late, the thing is done. There is no drawing back. We are engaged."

"Will you walk about all night, Jack, in case you fall asleep and find it is a dream? Will you write a letter in pencil and slip it into her letter-box so that she may have it at breakfast?"

"Celia, don't! For God's sake, don't. . . I can't stand this!"

"Will you quarrel with her, Jack, and kiss, and make it up? Will she stroke your head when you are tired, to take away the pain, and will you lie and look up in her face, and make up little verses about her eyes? I've got all your verses, Jack, dozens of them, locked away in my desk."

"You know I won't. That sort of thing is over for ever. It is the price I shall have to pay. One can't have the one big thing, and everything else into the bargain. I have made my choice, and the rest must go."

"But we must make quite sure what *is* the big thing. *I* am your big thing, Jack. You are tired and discouraged, and when people are discouraged things look out of proportion. To-day you put success first, and Celia second, but you will find out your mistake. You can't live without me, Jack, any more than I can live without you. It's gone deeper than you think."

Malham's hand was on the door, but he turned at that last word and looked at her across the room. She sat as he had so often seen her, leaning forward from the waist, her chin cupped in her hand, her grey eyes bent on him with an intensity of love. Among the drab furnishings of the room, the glowing mass of her hair shone with a burnished splendour. The sight of her represented all that was gracious and beautiful—his thought leaped to that other woman from whom he had parted but an hour before, he saw the two faces side by side, and for a moment he wavered. Only a moment, then he hardened himself, and turned once more.

"It is too late. I have made my choice. Goodbye, Celia."

"*Au revoir*, Jack. *My* Jack! You will come back to me!"

Her voice rang strong and valiant. In just that voice she had put courage into him time and again when he had come nigh to despair. In just that voice had she breathed her undying confidence in the future. But this time when he was lost to sight, and the thud of the closing door sounded through the little house, Celia laid her bright head on the table, and her tears fell fast on the scattered papers.

. . . . . .

In aristocratic circles engagements are of short duration. Malham was thankful of the fact, and acceded eagerly to a proposed date less than six weeks ahead. A furnished flat was secured in which he and Lady Anne could set up housekeeping, leaving the choice of a permanent residence to be made at leisure. He welcomed that decision as a relief from a painful ordeal. It had been a favourite amusement of Celia's to go house-hunting on holiday afternoons, and under her guidance it had proved a beguiling occupation. When luck was in the ascendant she would put on her best hat, obtain orders to view mansions in West End squares, and give herself airs to the caretaker on the subject of ball-room accommodation. When luck waned she would escort him to garden suburbs, and gush over a sitting-room four yards by five. And the furniture for mansion and villa alike had been chosen a hundred times over from a point of vantage outside shop windows. It would have been molten torture to go house-hunting and furnishing with Lady Anne!

In a quiet unobtrusive fashion Lady Anne was exacting. She expected daily visits, which were periods of acute misery to her fiancé. Her uncouth efforts to worm herself into his confidence shamed and exasperated; he was disagreeably conscious of

disappointing her expectations, yet more and more did it become impossible to act the lover's part. Conversation would lag between them and finally come to an end, then Anne's small eyes would redden as from unshed tears, she would lay her chill hands on his, and ask wistfully:

"Is anything the matter, John? Have I offended you in any way?"

"How could you offend me, Anne? You are everything that is good and generous. I am most grateful for all you have done."

"But you must love me, too. I want you to love me. You *do* love me, John?"

Once or twice at such questioning, a flood of anger and loathing, almost maniacal in its fury, rushed through Malham's veins, urging him on until it was all he could do to refrain from bursting into cruel laughter, into bitter, gibing words. Love *her!* That pitiful, sexless thing—he who had known Celia, and held her in his arms. Was Anne blind that she could not see what manner of woman she was? Had she no sense that she could not realize the nature of the bargain between them?

And every week of that endless six a letter came to him from Celia bearing the same message:

"I have seen it in the paper, Jack, but I know it is not true. You will never do it. You can't do it, Jack. You belong to me. Dear, it will be harder with every day that passes. Be brave and end it *now!* I know you better than you know yourself. Nothing that she can give you will make you happy apart from me. It's been hard for you—I know it too well, and you shall never hear a word of reproach, but—come soon, Jack! It's weary waiting. I have given you so much that I've no power to live alone. Your Celia."

Each letter said the same thing in different words, and each time that one arrived the struggle between love and ambition was fought afresh in Malham's mind. Never before had he realized all that Celia had counted for in his life; never had he yearned so passionately for her presence. A dozen times over he started with rapid footsteps to answer her appeal in person, but never once did he arrive at his destination. The very sight of the mean streets through which he was obliged to pass, served to chill his enthusiasm and awake the remembrance of all that a reconciliation must entail. To break off his engagement with Lady Anne Mulliner at the eleventh hour would be to alienate his political

patrons and ring the death knell of his hopes. He would be obliged to drag on year after year waiting for a chance of distinguishing himself at the Bar, living meantime in one of these mean little houses, in one of these mean little streets, turning out morning after morning to make his way to the Tube, among the crowd of black-coated, middle-class workers.

The struggle ended each time in the victory of ambition. He turned and retraced his steps towards his own chambers.

The last letter arrived on the morning of the marriage. Its message was the same, but the valiant confidence had waned, and a note of wildness took its place. Yet even now Celia would not, could not, believe that his decision was irrevocable. Even now she adjured him to reflect, to remember, to be warned! The handwriting was rough and untidy, hardly recognizable as Celia's dainty calligraphy; in every line, in every word there were signs of agitation and despair, but as Malham recognized with a pang, there was still no word of reproach.

He kissed the letter and held it passionately to his lips, before he dropped it into the fire. The husband of the Lady Anne Mulliner must not treasure love letters from another woman. The

paper flamed orange and blue, then shrivelled into blackened ashes. Malham, looking on, read into the sight a simile with his own life. The beauty, the splendour of it were burnt out; nothing but ashes remained.

It was a curious reflection for a man who would that day plant his foot firmly on the ladder of success!

The fashionable church was filled to overflowing; reporters seated in points of vantage jotted down the names of the aristocratic guests with other details of public interest. "Marriage of an Earl's Daughter." "Romantic Marriage." "Marriage in High Life." The titles were already drawn out awaiting the following description. "The Duchess of A. looked charming in amber velvet with a sable cloak. The Marchioness of B. looked charming in green, with a hat with white plumes. The bridesmaids, eleven in number, were a charming group in grey satin and silver veils. They carried charming bouquets of azaleas, which with charming gold and pearl bangles were the gift of the bridegroom. Their names were—. The bride wore a gown of white satin covered with old English point lace, the court train was draped with the same valuable lace, and lined with silver tissue.

She carried a bouquet of orchids." There were a dozen reporters in the church, and they used the word "charming" many dozens of times collectively, but not one of them ventured to apply it to the bride!

Lady Anne cried in a softly persistent fashion throughout the ceremony, and the sight of her tears awoke a smouldering fury in Malham's heart. Why need she cry? She had gained her desire. It was he who should cry! In the vestry a young married relative came forward, and with deft hands straightened the twisted wreath and arranged the folds of the veil. "Really, Anne!" she cried impatiently, "you positively *must* think of your appearance. My dear, if you could see yourself! For goodness' sake pull yourself together." As she turned away, she shot a glance at Malham, standing tall and impassive beside the table, and there came into her eyes a cold comprehending gleam. "There," said her eyes, "stands a man who has sold his soul!" There were eyes all round him, studying him where he stood, and in them all he read the same condemnation, the same scorn.

The organ blared; the bridesmaids ranged themselves behind the bridal couple, the procession left the vestry, and proceeded down the aisle. Now

there were more eyes, hundreds of eyes, staring with merciless gaze. The bride was trembling with nervousness, her chin shaking like that of a frightened child. All her life she had been snubbed and kept in the background; terror of her conspicuous position for the time being swamped her joy in her handsome spouse. The sound of her panting breath came to Malham's ears; he hurried his pace in fear of another breakdown, and the laces of the bridal train caught in the carved woodwork of a pew.

There was a momentary pause while a bridesmaid came to the rescue, and Malham, turning to discover the nature of the hindrance, felt an icy chill spread down his spine. In the pew by his side, within touch of his hand, stood Celia, tall and slim, gazing straight into his face. Her hair glowed like flames round her colourless face, her lips were parted, showing a gleam of teeth, her head was thrown back on the white column of her throat,—each cherished detail of her beauty smote on Malham with a separate pang, but it was the expression in her eyes which chilled his blood. *What was the expression in her eyes?*

Malham's heart beat in sickening thuds. Was it a moment, or an hour, during which he stood and stared back into those terrible eyes? To the on-

lookers the pause was barely perceptible; to him it seemed endless as eternity.

It was only when he was seated beside his bride in the carriage, and Anne was sobbing against his shoulder, that Malham realized the meaning of Celia's eyes.

They were dead eyes. They had *no* expression!

The reception was a nightmare, but it came to an end at last, and Malham and his bride bade good-bye to their friends, and started on the first stage of their honeymoon. It had been arranged that they should remain in town until the next morning, when they were to make an early start for the Continent. They drove to a fashionable hotel, where a suite of rooms had been secured for their use, and after a couple of hours' rest, went through the ordeal of their first *tête-à-tête* meal.

Malham felt like a man in a dream. He moved, he spoke, he ate, and drank as might a machine wound up to perform certain actions, but he was conscious of nothing but a pair of dead eyes gazing at him out of a living face. There was only one feeling of which he was capable—a feeling of fear—of deadly, overmastering fear.

Dinner over, Malham excused himself, and repaired to the great lounge of the hotel. Anne

had recovered her composure, and had embarked upon a series of sentimental reminiscences which bade fair to drive him demented. At all costs he must escape from her presence.

He seated himself at one of the small tables and automatically lifted an evening paper. The first thing that met his eye was his own name at the head of a column. "Marriage of Mr. John Malham and Lady Anne Mulliner." He crushed the sheet with a savage hand, and thrust it back on the table, and as he did so another paragraph separated itself from the context and smote upon his brain.

"Suicide of a High School Teacher. A well-dressed young woman was drowned in the Serpentine at five o'clock this afternoon. The life-saving apparatus was put in operation with all possible speed, but when the body was recovered, life was found to be extinct. The deceased had letters in her possession addressed to Miss Celia Bevan, 19 Wrothesley Street, Maida Vale. It is believed to be a case of premeditated suicide."

Across the hall two young men were whispering to each other behind their papers.

"That fellow over there, by the big palm,—that's Malham! Reading an account of his own

wedding. Clever fellow, but poor as a rat. Been dragging along for years at the Bar, but that's all over now! With a father-in-law like Lord Fluteson to give him a push, he'll soon romp ahead. Jolly good day's work this has been for him!"

His companion looked across the lounge.

"Some fellows," he said grudgingly, "have all the luck!"

X

THE GIRL WHO WISHED FOR WORK

NORAH BOYCE was one of numerous young women who have seen better days. During the seven years which had elapsed since she had bidden farewell to a Parisian boarding-school, she had enjoyed all the sweets of existence which fall to the lot of a girl whom nature has endowed with beauty and a deceased parent with an income of five hundred pounds a year. And then, of a sudden, catastrophe overtook her. Societies collapsed, banks failed, labourers went on strike and brought down dividends on railway investments. The five hundred pounds was reduced to something considerably under one, and Norah spent her nights in tears, and her days in studying the newspapers in search of "something to do."

Being still young in experience, she started by spending a small fortune on advertisements in which she expressed her willingness to undertake secretarial duties, to act as companion to an invalid

lady—as governess to young children, or as instructress in the arts of poker-work, marquetry, and painting on china; then as time went on and the public continued to treat her overtures with contempt, she abandoned this mode of procedure, and contented herself with reading the notices for which *other* people had paid, and in wasting postage-stamps in reply.

It was when this occupation had been continued for several months and her spirits had fallen to the lowest possible ebb that her eye was attracted by a paragraph which awakened new hopes. A lady wished to meet with a young person of good principles and cheerful disposition, who would accompany her to church on Sundays, spend some hours of every morning in reading aloud, playing upon the harmonium, and making herself useful and agreeable; and applicants were directed to apply in person at No. 8 Berrington Square, between three and five o'clock in the afternoon.

"I shall try for it!" cried Norah instantly. "It will be horribly humiliating. I shall be shown into the dining-room, and expected to take a seat between the sideboard and the door, as servants do when they are applying for a situation, but anything is better than sitting here, doing nothing! I don't feel remarkably cheerful at present, but it

is in the old lady's power to put me in the wildest spirits, if she is so inclined. She must be old—no human creature under sixty could have written that advertisement. She can't have any children, or she would not be advertising for a companion; she must be well off, or she could not afford to pay for "extras" in this rash fashion; she would have to put up with being dull as I have done the last month. Heigho! It would be very pleasing if she took a fancy to me, and adopted me as her heir! I don't in the least see why she shouldn't! I can be very charming when I choose. I shall put on my sealskin coat, and my best hat!"

A few hours later, Miss Boyce knocked at the door of No. 8 Berrington Square, was informed that Mrs. Baker was at home, and shown into a room on the right of the entrance hall. It was the dining-room. "Of course! I knew it!" said Norah to herself, and straightway proceeded to take stock of her surroundings. A red flock wall-paper, a heavy mahogany sideboard, on which were flanked an imposing array of biscuit-boxes and cruets; mahogany chairs upholstered in black haircloth; an india-rubber plant in the centre of the table, and an American organ in the corner! The visitor rolled her eyes to the ceiling, and went through an expressive pantomime of despair, for she was

an artistic, beauty-loving creature, whose spirits were sensibly affected by the colour of a wall-paper, and to whom it was a real trial to live in ugly surroundings.

She had barely time to compose herself before the door opened, and the mistress of the house made her appearance.

Mrs. Baker was an old lady of the white rabbit type, weak-eyed, anæmic, and kindly, and evidently unaccustomed to the engagement of "young persons," for she shook hands with Norah, seated herself in an easy chair by the fire, and waited developments with a blandly inquiring smile.

It was evident that Norah was expected to advertise her capabilities without the aid of the usual cross-questionings, so, taking her courage in both hands, she launched forth into explanations, prefaced, it must sorrowfully be admitted, by a reference to better days; confessed to a passion for reading aloud and playing on the harmonium, and dwelt at length on the advantages of her scholastic training. When at last she paused for breath, after having talked for a good five minutes on end, the old lady blinked her eyes, and said:

"What, love?—I didn't quite catch what you were saying. I am a little hard of hearing!"

"I might have known it!" Norah told herself

reproachfully. "Deaf, of course! It just completes the character," and in a heightened voice she proceeded to repeat every word of her former statement. Signs of impatience became visible on the listener's face as she proceeded, and she hurried on in order to announce the name of her musical professor before she should be interrupted by the question which was evidently hovering on the old lady's lips.

"Did you ever happen to meet a family named Henstock, who lived in Finsbury Park? A corner house it was—white, with green posts at the gate?" queried Mrs. Baker, bending forward with an expression of breathless curiosity.

Norah gasped, and shook her head. The connection between the family of Henstock in the corner house in Finsbury Park, and her own application for the post of companion, was so exceedingly remote as to reduce her to a condition of petrified silence.

"How very extraordinary! You are so like Mary Ellen, the very image of Mary Ellen! She was a great favourite of mine, was Mary Ellen, and she married a very worthy young man, an assistant in a bank at Bradford. Yes! She had two lovely little boys. It was very good of you to come and see me, my dear, and I should

like very much to have you with me. I am reading a most interesting biography at present, and I take in several periodicals. Yes! Perhaps you could come on Monday morning. At eleven o'clock."

Three months' experience of answering advertisements had left Norah so little prepared for this speedy acceptance of her services, that she was surprised into protest.

"But I do not wish to hurry your decision! Perhaps you would like to have references, or to consult your——"

"No, love! I have no one to consider but myself, and you have such a strong resemblance to Mary Ellen! It is in this way: My nephew has been in the habit of going to church with me. I cannot hear very much; but I like to go all the same, and John was in the habit of repeating the sermon to me in the afternoon. Yes! He is a very estimable-minded young man, and very good to his old aunt! It was he who suggested that I should advertise for a companion. He said it would be so lonely for me if he ever went out of town, but he will be very pleased when I tell him that I have found someone so like Mary Ellen. He has such a dislike for these new-fashioned, strong-minded girls who are always calling out for their

rights. I am sure, my dear, that you have too much sense for such notions. You look far too pretty and amiable. Now about the little matter of remuneration! . . . Would half a crown a day be agreeable?"

Norah gasped again, with a sensation as if a pail of water had been suddenly douched over her head. Half a crown a day! It was what people paid to charwomen. Good Gracious! She tried to calculate what sum was represented by seven half-crowns, and the delay which took place before she succeeded in settling the point convinced her that, after all, she would be wise to accept Mrs. Baker's offer, since in another situation she might possibly be required to teach arithmetic and mathematics! She perjured herself, therefore, by declaring that half a crown would be very agreeable indeed, and returned home undecided between hilarity and depression.

For the next three weeks Norah earned her half-crown a day with equal satisfaction to herself and her employer. The biographies were a trifle dull, it is true, and the harmonium decidedly creaky and out of tune, but the old lady was kindly and affectionate, and her companion had the pleasure of feeling that her services were appre-

ciated. By this time, however, she had fully grasped the fact that seven half-crowns equal seventeen-and-six, and in the conviction that further effort was required to secure herself from anxiety, had recommenced the daily searchings of the newspaper columns. Then it was that she discovered an advertisement which filled her with a sense of delighted amusement, because of its strange likeness and yet contrast to the one of a month before. Another lady, it appeared, was desirous of finding a companion, but this time the advertiser was a champion of women's rights, who wished to meet with someone of like opinions, who would walk with her in the afternoons and discuss the problems and difficulties of the sex.

"'Curiouser and curiouser!'" quoted Norah to herself. "What a droll coincidence. Now, if I had not—but of course as I *have*, I could not possibly. . . . And yet, why not? I am sure after being shut up in that stuffy room all morning reading those dull, old-fashioned books, I am in a most daring and revolutionary mood in the afternoons. I should not be pretending to take an interest in the suffrage question; I should really and truly feel it. . . . It would be instructive to hear what this lady has to say for herself, and then, after marching about the country listening

to her tirades, I should probably be quite thankful to get back to mediævalism and my dear old lady in the morning. . . . I'll do it! I will! I'll go and see her without an hour's delay. . . ."

The advertisement had not asked for a personal application, but Norah had gained experience by this time, and was perfectly aware of the advantage possessed by Miss Boyce in her sealskin coat and best hat, over the "young persons" who, as a rule, applied for situations. She intended to be not only heard but seen.

The advanced lady lived in a flat which was as artistic as the house in Berrington Square was commonplace. She was a spinster of uncertain age, tall and angular, and so formidable in appearance that at the sight of her Norah was overcome with a panic of nervousness.

"Good afternoon," she stammered. "I—I saw your advertisement in the *Daily News*, and thought that I would—that is to say, that I would apply—that I would try to—to. . . . I hope I have not inconvenienced you by calling in person! . . ."

"Not at all, not at all. I have already received several replies, but it is far more satisfactory to have a personal interview," returned the spinster, staring very hard at Norah's hat, and craning her

neck to see how the bows were arranged at the back. "I am ordered to take a certain amount of outdoor exercise daily, and as my friends are not able to accompany me, I wish to meet with a lady who is interested in the same subjects as myself, and with whom I can enjoy exchange of ideas as we walk. You look rather young, but I gather from the fact of your having replied to my advertisement, that you are——"

"I am very much interested. I should enjoy hearing your views, and, though I am young, I have seen a great deal of life. I have travelled more than most people, and am now alone in the world, and obliged to earn my own living."

Norah had been in haste to reply, in order to avoid a more compromising statement, but now she stopped short, surprised by a flash of delight which illumined the listener's face.

"Ah—h!" cried Miss Mellor, in the rapturous tone of one who has suddenly been granted a long-craved-for opportunity. "Then you have had experience! You *know!* You *feel!* You agree with me that the history of the human race, the throng of events, the multifarious forms of human life are only the accidental form of the Idea; they do not belong to the Idea itself, in which alone lies the adequate objectivity of the Will,

but only to that phenomenon which appears to the knowledge of the individual, and which is just as foreign and unessential to the Idea itself as the figures which they assume are to the clouds, or the foam flakes to the brooks! So true! So deeply true! You agree with me, I feel sure!"

"Certainly. Quite so. I mean to say—naturally! Oh, yes. By all means!" gasped Norah weakly, and her head fell back against the chair. She was not to know that the speaker had discovered her little speech in a book only one short half-hour before, and had learned it off by heart in the fond hope of being able to introduce it incidentally into conversation, and she felt faint and dizzy with the effort of trying to understand.

Miss Mellor saw that she had made an impression, and beamed with complacent delight.

"Ah, yes; I see that we are at one!" she cried. "And is it not a comfort to feel that, having once grasped this idea, we shall now be able to distinguish between the Will and the Idea, and between the Idea and its manifestation? The events of the world will now have significance for us, inasfar only as they are the letters out of which we may read the Idea of man. We can never again believe with the vulgar——"

"Oh, my goodness!" cried Norah to herself.

"To think that it should have come to this! I'm vulgar! I must be; and I never knew it! I don't understand one *word* she is saying. If I ever get out of this room alive——"

She sank still farther back in her chair and stared at Miss Mellor with fascinated, unblinking eyes, like a poor little rabbit beneath the spell of the boa-constrictor. In a dim, far-off way, she heard the stream of unmeaning eloquence, but her one supreme longing was to bring the interview to an end, to crawl home and lie down upon the sofa, and put wet cloths on her head, and go to sleep and forget all about her sufferings. . . . Suddenly the clock chimed, and she awoke to the fact that it was over half an hour since she had entered the room. She rose to her feet, and was about to falter forth apologies for her ignorance, when, to her astonishment, the advanced lady bore down upon her, and grasping her hand in fervent fashion, declared that she was enchanted to have discovered a kindred spirit, and that, suffering as she did from constant coldness and misunderstanding, it was soul-refreshing to meet with one whose mind was as her own, and that she would henceforth live in anticipation of their afternoon communions!

For one moment Norah was stupefied with

amazement, the next her eyes shone, and the dimples dipped in her cheeks, for with a flash of intuition she had grasped the significance of the situation! What the advanced lady really desired was not a companion who would talk and air her own opinions, but a dummy figure to whom she herself could lay down the law; a target at which she could let fly the arrows of her newly-acquired wisdom. An occasional murmur of assent would therefore be the extent of the companion's duties, which feat Norah felt herself well able to accomplish.

For the next few months the enterprising Miss Boyce fulfilled her two daily engagements with equal satisfaction to herself and her employers. In the morning, within the fusty confines of No. 8 Berrington Square, she read aloud extracts from antiquated volumes which had been the favourites of the old lady's youth; likewise retrimmed caps, sprayed the leaves of the india-rubber plant, retrieved dropped stitches in knitting, droned out voluntaries and national airs on the wheezy old harmonium, and listened to endless reminiscences of the Henstock family, and other worthies equally unknown.

In the afternoons Norah roamed the different parks in company with Miss Mellor, preserving

an attentive silence while that good lady quoted the opinions of her friends, or paraphrased the leading articles in the Radical press. Her first feeling towards this, the second of her employers, had been largely tinged with impatience and lack of sympathy, but as time went on, she relented somewhat in the hardness of her judgment, and felt the dawning of a kindly pity. She was a very lonely woman—this tall angular spinster who talked so loudly of her rights; love had never come into her life, and in all the breadth of the land she had hardly a relation whom she could take by the hand.

Once, in the middle of a heated argument on the suffrage, Miss Mellor paused to look longingly at a curly-headed baby toddling across the path; and beside the duck-pond in Regent's Park she invariably lost the thread of her argument in watching the crowds of merry children feeding their pets. Norah reflected that had Miss Mellor been a happy wife and mother she might not have troubled her head about a vote. All the same, the result of education on the woman's question had been to convince Norah that the demand for "rights" had been founded on some very definite "wrongs."

After the long walk the two ladies would return

to tea in the flat, where the companion consumed the wafer-like bread and butter and dainty cakes with Philistine enjoyment, and even Miss Mellor herself descended from her high horse, and inquired curiously:

"Where do you get your hats?"

Of her two employers Norah had distinct preference for the old lady, Mrs. Baker. She was of a more lovable nature than the voluble Miss Mellor, and, moreover, as she herself had announced—she had a nephew! The nephew was a handsome, well-set-up man of thirty, who possessed considerable culture and refinement, and a most ingratiating kindliness of demeanour towards his homely old aunt.

The first Sunday after Norah entered upon her duties, young Mr. Baker did not call at Berrington Square; on the second Sunday he came to midday dinner; on the third, he met the two ladies at the church door after morning service, and remained with them for the whole of the afternoon; on the fourth, he was already seated in the pew when they entered the church, and he persisted in these good habits until it became a matter of course that he should spend the whole day in Berrington Square, as Norah herself had done from the beginning of her engagement. In the afternoon

Mrs. Baker would invariably make the hospitable suggestion that "if John liked" he could descend to a chill, fireless room in the basement to indulge in an after-dinner weed, but John refused to move until Miss Boyce had given her repetition of the morning's service. He said that he was afraid she might forget an important point, in which case he should be at hand to jog her memory. "John is so thoughtful!" said his aunt proudly.

As a matter of fact, John never once volunteered a suggestion on any one of these occasions. He seemed to be fully occupied in using his eyes and ears, and in truth it was both a pretty and touching sight to see the young fresh face bent close to the withered countenance of the deaf old woman, and to listen to the thrush-like tones of the girl's voice, as with a sweet and simple eloquence she gave her brief résumé of the morning's sermon. The old lady nodded and wagged her head to enforce the points, while the tears trickled down her cheeks. From time to time John also would take a promenade to the window, and clear his throat loudly as he stared at the dusty trees. Strange how much more powerful those sermons appeared in the repetition!

After the recital was over, young Mr. Baker would take Miss Boyce to examine the ferns in

the tiny conservatory, while his aunt enjoyed her forty winks; in the evening he escorted her back to her lodgings. He was a most attentive young man!

In Mrs. Baker's opinion "John" was infallible, and by and by Norah became so much infected with this view that her afternoon's occupation became fraught with misery, as she thought of what "John" would say if he knew to what heresies she was lending her ears. One Sunday afternoon returning to the Berrington Square drawing-room after a short absence, she overheard a few words which sent an added pang through her heart.

"—Most fortunate indeed!" John was saying. "You might have searched the world over, and not found another like her. I had begun to fear that the type was extinct. A sweet, modest, old-fashioned girl!"

That evening Norah wet her pillow with her tears, and astonished the advanced lady the next afternoon by contradicting assertions, and raising up objections in a most unprecedented fashion. These signs of backsliding were very distressing to Miss Mellor, who had been encouraged by her companion's unfailing acquiescence to imagine herself unanswerable in argument, but she was encouraged to believe that example might per-

haps accomplish what precept had failed to inspire.

"You will, I know, rejoice with me on a great honour which has been conferred upon me by my fellow-workers," she announced proudly one day. "I have been promoted from the reserves to a foremost position in the fighting line. I am nominated for active service on Friday next!"

Norah's eyes were exceptionally large and expressive, and the saucer-like stare of curiosity which she turned upon the speaker was very gratifying to that good lady's feelings.

"On Friday evening. At the Albert Hall. The Chancellor is to speak. We shall be there. Twenty are nominated for service. *I* am Number Nine!"

Norah stared harder than ever. This sounded rather perilously like the story of a Nihilist Plot which she had read in a shilling shocker some weeks before. She had visions of bomb explosions and wholesale arrests, and, as ever, the thought of John obtruded itself into the foreground of her mind. What would John think if Miss Mellor were arrested, and gave the name of Norah Boyce as her chosen friend and confidante?

"Number Nine, for *what?*" she gasped nervously, and Miss Mellor was hurried into unthinking reply:

"For screaming—I mean protesting. The first eight champions will raise their voices in rotation. They will be silenced, probably ejected. Then it will be My Turn."

"Ejected!" Norah looked scared. "Turned out. Oh—h! How dreadful! They will seize hold of you—men will seize hold of you, and pull and drag. They will pinch your arms. . . . It must be horrid to be pinched!"

"What would have become of the world if other great reformers had ceased their struggles through dread of being pinched?" demanded Miss Mellor sternly; and Norah felt snubbed, and looked it. She had no courage left for further argument.

On the next Friday afternoon Norah took her way to the flat to accompany her fighting employer on the walk abroad which should invigorate her for the evening's fray, but to her dismay found the good lady stretched upon the sofa, very flushed as to face, and husky as to voice.

"It is quinsy," she announced. "I'm subject to it. I felt it coming on, but I would not give in. I have gargled and fomented all morning, but it is too late. I couldn't scream to save my life. It's a terrible, terrible disappointment, but I am thankful that I need not upset the Committee's plans. You shall take my place!"

"I?" cried Norah shrilly. "No, no—I can't! I couldn't—I wouldn't—not for anything in the whole wide world! Call out before a whole meeting, have them all staring at me, strange men catching hold of me, dragging my sleeves, crushing my hat—*never!* I'd sooner die!"

"Then," croaked Miss Mellor hoarsely, "I shall go myself!" And from this point she refused to budge. She was ill; in the natural course of events she would grow worse; if she went out into the damp and the cold, and endured the excitement of a crowded political meeting, she would most certainly be very ill indeed; but she had promised; she could not disappoint the Committee at the eleventh hour; she had no energy to seek further for a substitute. Then her voice took a pathetic turn, and she sighed feebly.

"I have been kind to you, Norah. I have tried to be your friend. Danvers (the maid) would accompany you to the Hall. You have nothing to do but to sit still and interrupt when your turn arrives. How can you be so selfish and unkind?"

As time went on and argument and appeal alike failed to move Miss Mellor from her position, a paralysis of helplessness seized Norah in its grip. She knew that in the end she would be compelled to consent, for of two horrifying alternatives it

seemed the least to dare a certain amount of buffeting for herself, rather than allow another woman to run the risk of serious, even fatal, consequences.

At nine o'clock that evening, then, behold a trembling and faint-hearted Number Nine seated at the end of one of the rows of stalls at the Albert Hall, the faithful Danvers by her side, listening with all her ears, not to the eloquence of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but to the shrill interruptions from feminine tongues which punctuated his utterances. Numbers One and Two had been escorted from the gallery by indulgent, if somewhat contemptuous, stewards. Numbers Four and Five had received less consideration; Number Six had been undeniably hustled; Number Seven had squealed aloud. Norah realized with a dread sinking of the heart that the temper of the meeting was rising, and that each fresh disturber of the peace would receive less consideration. Only one more, and then. . . . The great building whirled before her eyes, the faces on the platform became faint and blurred, her heart pounded so loudly that it seemed impossible that her neighbours should not hear its thuds. She turned her head to look at the nearest door and examine the faces of the group of stewards waiting in readiness at its portal. Were they

very big, *very* fierce, *very* formidable? Which of the number would be the first to tear her from her seat? Her pretty face was blanched and drawn beneath her flower-wreathed hat; one of the stewards meeting her glance moved forward to her side with a stifled exclamation of dismay. He bent low over her, whispering in her ear:

"Miss Boyce! what are you doing here? Are you alone? You ought not to be here without a man to look after you. It is getting too noisy—too excited. If there are any more interruptions things will become dangerous. Let me take you out quietly, while there is time——"

John Baker, by all that was confounding and terrible! John, the last man on earth whom she would have wished to witness her humiliation! John, who had called her a "modest, old-fashioned girl.". . . It was the last straw to poor Norah's composure; her fluttering heart gave one sickening leap, and then appeared to stop altogether; she held out her hands with a feeble, despairing gesture, and collapsed in a limp little heap in John Baker's arms.

When Norah came back to consciousness she was lying on a form in a bare, boarded room, and John was engaged in sprinkling water from a water-

jug over the front of her best silk blouse. She sat up hastily, brushed the hair from her forehead, and stared around with bewildered eyes. A roar of applause from the great hall broke the silence, and brought back struggling remembrance.

"Did you—did you turn me out?"

"I *carried* you out! You fainted, and I brought you in here. It was no wonder; you were not accustomed to such sights. Did you imagine in your faintness that you had been turned out like those other screaming women, you poor little frightened girl?" asked John's big voice in its most caressing tones.

Norah shivered with dismay.

"I was—I am—I mean I *should* have been, if I had stayed five minutes longer! I'm Number Nine!" she cried; and then seeing John's stare of stupefied dismay, promptly threw up her hands to her face, and burst into weak-minded tears.

"Oh—oh! What *will* you think of me—what *will* you say! . . . I was obliged to earn some money—and half a crown a day was not enough,—Mrs. Baker gives me half a crown. I—I go to another lady in the afternoons, and she is a Suffragette. She is very kind to me, and very patient, because I'm stupid, and can't understand, and—and I don't seem to care! I don't *want*

a vote, but she was Number Nine to-night, and she is ill—her throat is very bad, she might be dangerously ill if she came out. She would only stay at home if I promised to take her place, and, she has been very kind. . . . I promised, and now I've failed. I was too terribly frightened. And then I saw your face. . . . Oh, what *do* you think of me?"

But John Baker refused to give any expression of opinion. All he said was:

"Half a crown a day! She offered you *that!* Oh, my poor little girl!" And his voice was so low and tender that at the sound of it Norah sobbed afresh.

"Don't cry. Put on your hat. I will take you into the air, and drive you home in a taxi. You will feel better in the air," said John quietly.

He gave her his arm, and escorted her into the corridor, and as they walked along, another roar sounded from within the precincts of the hall, and through an open doorway shot a dishevelled female form, struggling in the grasp of half a dozen stewards. Danvers herself! The faithful Danvers, who, seeing the collapse of her mistress' proxy, had gallantly taken upon herself the duties of Number Nine. Norah shuddered, and grasped more tightly John's protecting arm.

"Oh, what *must* you think of me?" she demanded once more; and John, looking down at her as they reached the cool air of the street, replied sturdily:

"I think that no woman can serve two masters. Can't you make up your mind to take *one* instead?"

XI

THE AFTER YEARS

FIFTEEN years had come and gone. The men and women who had sat round the fire on that memorable New Year's Eve in Mrs. Ingram's hospitable country manor, had left youth behind, and entered upon the strenuous term of middle age, while their host and hostess had reached a stage still further on the downward path, and frankly ranged themselves among the old.

Fifteen years ago! And now once more the end of the year was approaching, and Mr. Ingram and his wife were discussing their plans for the festive season. It was a very frail woman who lay back against the cushions of her chair, and to her husband all outside considerations were as naught compared with the necessity of screening her from undue exertion.

"Forget that it is Christmas time, that's the best thing you can do! All your life you have

worked and schemed to give other people pleasure, now you must take it easy, and let them have a turn for a change. No Christmas presents, no village treats, no house-party over the New Year. You and I will have a quiet resting time, and think of nobody but ourselves."

His wife smiled, her fine, delicate smile, and stretched out her hand to meet his.

"Foolish man!" she said softly. "What folly you do talk! The Christmas presents are *ready*, dear. I begin collecting them each January, as soon as the last batch is out of the way, and it would break my heart to disappoint the villagers of their treat; but I'll be very good, and leave the whole of the arrangements to the vicar. That's a concession made entirely to please you. I want to please you, because as regards the house-party I am going to ask *you* to give in to me! I'd been planning a very special gathering for this year. Please, dear, don't say no! It would be such a great interest. I want to ask all the members of that Heart's Desire party of fifteen years ago—all that are left, that's to say, and sit over the fire together as we did then, for the first hour of the New Year, and talk over our different experiences. I have thought of it for the last three or four years, but something has always come in the

way, and now—now I would rather not postpone it again."

Her husband knew the meaning of that unwillingness. She was thinking that she might not live to see another New Year, and the knowledge was enough to stifle any objections which he might have made.

"You shall do as you choose, dearest," he said softly. "I ask only that you should spare yourself. You must spend the mornings in your own room, and then you will be able to enjoy your guests for the rest of the day." He was silent for a few minutes, gazing into the heart of the fire. "It is one thing to wish," he said at last, "and another to confess what has really happened. I wonder if they *will* confess!"

"Probably—not!" Mrs. Ingram said. "We may be sure of one thing at least, that the happenings which went deepest will never be put into words. All the same we shall know. It is not only by speech that the heart tells its secrets, Hubert!"

"But the ordinary man judges only by his ears. His eyes are holden that he cannot see."

"Ah, well," sighed Mrs. Ingram softly, "there's an instinct that is truer than sight!"

Her husband pressed her hand, but did not

answer. He knew well that his wife possessed a wonderful heart-vision which could pierce beneath the deceptions of surface appearance, down to the truth beneath; but this was a plane to which he could not follow; and in truth he could not trust himself to discuss it. This dearly loved wife had always been of an unusual exalted character, and with the decline of bodily health, she seemed to cast from her one by one the hindering frailties of the flesh, and to become ever more spiritual and crystalline. He reverenced, he worshipped, but—he feared! A spirit so fine seemed out of place on this gross earth.

But, thank God! the old gaiety was not dead, and her laugh rang clear as ever as a few minutes later he brought a writing-table to her side, and they embarked upon the work of tracing old friends under new conditions.

Mr. Ingram would have been hard put to it to remember the names alone of all who had been present on the historic occasion, but his wife's diary supplied an account not only of these, but of manners and appearance, with a surprisingly verbatim record of what each person had said. She had the memory which records words, and now as she read over one pronouncement after another,

something of her own keenness entered into her husband's manner.

"By jove, you have a memory! It all comes back as I hear you reading—the very words—the very expressions. I can see Claudia sitting in that chair, telling us about the rich cousin who sent her cast-off clothes, and looking so wonderfully pretty and sparkling. Ah, poor Claudia! Well—one is bound to come up against tragedy, if one follows the happenings of nine lives for fifteen years. All things considered, I think we have less of it than might have been expected. Who comes next on the list? Norah Boyce, eh? We shan't have Norah, since that clever husband of hers has got this appointment in Canada; but we know at least that things go well with her. Nice little Norah! She deserved her good luck. And then comes Lilith Wastneys. No need to look up her address, eh? Care of the Rt. Hon. Hereward Lowther, would reach her the world over. And John Harely Malham! These friends of yours have developed into very great personages, dear! Do you think they will care to accept invitations from simple country dwellers like ourselves?"

"I shall send them invitations, and I think they will come," Mrs. Ingram said quietly. People

had a way of doing what she wished, which seemed the more extraordinary as she never argued nor persuaded. "Those two are our only notables; the others are leading quite ordinary lives, so ordinary that we shall have to resort to the directory to trace one or two. I have not heard of Francis Manning for years."

"Manning, Manning! Which was Manning? The man who was in such a dickens of a hurry to get himself into trouble?"

"No, that was Val Lessing. Val is quite a prosperous City man now. He sends me a Christmas card every year. Francis Manning was the big, lazy creature who couldn't think of anything he wanted so much as to be let alone, to jog along in comfort. I have heard nothing of him since he wrote years ago to tell me of his marriage. I sent him a present."

"I'll bet you did!" commented her husband, laughing. "Oh, well, we can easily track Mr. Manning. Then there comes Juliet! There's no difficulty about Juliet. Let me see! What was it that Juliet wished for?"

"Adventure!" Mrs. Ingram said, and they both smiled.

"So Juliet wished for adventure, did she? Well! Well!" cried Mr. Ingram nodding. "*How* many

inches should you say she measures round the waist at the present moment?"

But at this his wife protested strongly.

"Too bad! Too bad! Why should the mere fact of being stout make it seem ridiculous for a woman to have a share in romance or excitement? I'm not going to allow you to laugh at Juliet. Wait at least until you have heard what she has to say. Now we come to the last on the list —Rupert Dempster, Rupert who wished for love."

"I remember," said her husband shortly. Many things that had happened on that evening had faded from memory, but the shock occasioned by Rupert's unexpected confession had impressed it on his mind. In imagination he could see the firelight playing upon the tired face, and hear the strong, quiet tone speaking of his ideal love, the primal, overmastering affinity of mind for mind, soul for soul, body for body. And it was this Rupert Dempster who had married a woman admittedly insane! Rumour said that she had to a great extent regained her reason, but still . . . Mr. Ingram registered a hope that Dempster and his wife would not accept his wife's invitation for New Year's Eve!

It was New Year's Eve, and throughout the afternoon one batch of visitors after another drove up to the door of the Manor. Some had travelled by train, some by motor, and each guest in turn was received by the hostess, welcomed with her inimitable charm, and escorted to the rooms apportioned to them, where tea was served instead of in the hall downstairs, as was the usual custom in the household. It did not satisfy Mrs. Ingram's dramatic sense that her guests should meet one by one; she preferred to postpone the moment until they met *en masse* round the dinner table later on.

Six invitations had been sent out, and in due time six replies came back. Some were affectionate in tone, others politely formal, some implied a willingness to stay as long as they should be asked; others regretted that one day only could be spared; but so far as the anniversary itself was concerned, each of the six notes brought the acceptance which Mrs. Ingram had so confidently expected. By six o'clock that evening six of the surviving members of the original party were once more gathered together beneath the roof of the Manor.

It was just eight o'clock when the sound of the gong pealed through the house, and Mr. and Mrs.

Ingram took their stand in the great hall, to watch the procession of their guests down the stairway.

First of all came a tall man, muscular and healthy, a typical country squire, the sunburn of his skin showing in marked contrast to his white shirt and waistcoat. A handsome man, with an air of agreeable content, and beside him a stout matron, her large face wreathed in smiles, her dress a handsome creation of the year before last.

Behind her, creeping close to the wall, a plain, insignificant woman trailed a robe of magnificent gold brocade, while the glitter of diamonds on neck and head lent an additional wanness to the pinched face. This was the Lady Anne Malham, and by her side walked the husband whose success in life had made him a world-known figure. The large head, and hawk-like features had been so often represented in the Press that the public recognized him at a glance, but few of those who studied the weary face realized that this was a man who had not yet seen his forty-fifth year. There was no lingering trace of youth on the face of John Malham, millionaire!

Behind the Malhams came yet another couple: the woman's left hand rested lightly on the banister, while on the inner side of the stairway, her husband

slipped his arm through hers, as though to afford a double security to her descent. Slim, ethereally transparent, her white shoulders rising above a dress of misty black, a carmine flush staining the soft oval of her cheeks, Eve Dempster appeared more like a beautiful wraith than a woman of flesh and blood. The years had brought to her none of the ordinary signs of age; as though loath to mar so exquisite a creature, they had passed by, leaving behind nothing but an air of additional transparence and fragility to mark their course. Rupert, on the contrary, looked more than his age. His face was lined as by a ceaseless anxiety, but in his eyes there was a great content.

Eve Dempster's long, misty train floated so far behind as to necessitate a gap in the descent of the guests. The gap, and the isolated position which she occupied as the first of the guests to descend in single file, threw into greater prominence the stolid, ungainly figure of Mrs. Francis Manning, clad in a satin gown of a violent shade of blue. Her light hair was elaborately waved and dressed in the latest eccentricity of the day; tight white kid gloves came to an end half-way up her reddened arms. She looked what she was, a middle-class matron of the suburbs, divided between pride and embarrassment in her present position. Her hus-

band followed close behind, large, heavily built, with clean-shaven face, patient, saddened, strikingly controlled. Mrs. Ingram, watching from the hall beneath, felt a smarting of the eyes as she looked at that face, and remembered the torpid complacence of the days that were gone!

The next couple were in appearance perhaps the most normal of any. A man too alert and supple to be yet classed as middle-aged, a pretty, soft-eyed woman, with humorous lips, and a graceful head poised at an angle which suggested an agreeable touch of coquetry; a woman whose spirit remained young; a woman who retained the power to charm, though the dreaded forty hovered but a few years ahead.

And then, last of all, sweeping downwards with the indefinable air of those accustomed to high places, came the guests of honour, the Rt. Hon. Hereward Lowther, and Lilith, his wife. The Minister was smiling, and the smile showed him at his best. A physiognomist would have read in his face a curious mingling of weakness and strength but the old shadow was replaced by a radiant complacence, and there was a touch of obvious though perfectly good-natured condescension in his bearing as he surveyed the group in the hall. He was ready to be all that was agreeable to his

wife's old friends, but he expected that in their turn they would appreciate the honour paid by his presence.

As for Lilith herself, a murmur of incredulity arose from the watchers as she stepped into sight, so extraordinarily like the Lilith of old did she appear. The pale hair was twisted round the head in identically the same fashion as of yore, the white satin dress, with the swathing of tulle round the shoulders, followed the same natural lines. There was no glitter of gems, but Val Lessing noticed with a thrill of remembrance that round her throat there were ropes of pearls,—lustrous, shimmering pearls, for which a man might venture his life. In the shaded light of the lamps there were no lines to be seen on the quiet face. It seemed impossible to believe that fifteen long years had passed by since that white-robed figure had last descended that staircase!

A few moments of merry greetings and laughter, of introductions by host and hostess, and then the house-party once more formed into pairs, filed into the dining-room, and took their places round the festive board.

It was a long and elaborate meal which followed, and in the drawing-room afterwards the guests found a delightful entertainment provided for their

benefit. The days were over when dancing appealed as an ideal manner of passing the time; to-night the guests sat still and were amused by others, and as the hour of twelve drew nigh, watched the performance of an exquisite little masque of the seasons, in which the old year and the new played the leading characters.

More than one person suspected the authorship of that masque, and recognized another instance of Mrs. Ingram's generalship, in tuning the minds of the hearers to a desired note, before the moment of the conference arrived.

They stood together in the great hall, hand in hand, waiting for the striking of the hour from the church tower, men and women, where before had stood youths and maidens; together, as the last note died away, they turned back to the fire, and seated themselves in the circling chairs, but when they were all seated there were still two chairs which remained vacant. To the majority of the company the presence of these chairs appeared the most meaningless of incidents; two only of the number divined their significance,—Rupert Dempster and the Squire's stout, prosaic-looking wife. As usual it was the woman who put her thoughts into words:

"Ah, poor Claudia! poor Meriel!" she sighed

softly. "How little we thought that they would be absent when we met again! And such tragic fates. . . . That beautiful Claudia! Can you remember how she sat that night, making her naughty, audacious speeches, and looking so sweet and bewitching all the time that one could not believe that she meant half she said. But she *did*, or how could she have married that man? Meriel was staying with her, at the time that she first—found out! She persuaded her to see the specialist. Claudia *dared* not tell her husband. To the very last she braved it out. One would not have expected her to have such courage! And when he did know, he went straight away and never saw her again. She would see no one. She lived alone with her nurses until the end. Poor Claudia! She wished for great riches, and she got them, but——"

"Found bitterness to her soul! Yes. That is the reward of seeking the worthless thing," Mrs. Ingram said quietly. "Claudia had a few years given to her to taste the power of money, and a few years more to test its helplessness. She learned many lessons, poor child, in that hidden room. I sent for one of her nurses after she died. The woman cried bitterly when she spoke of her. She said she had never had a patient who was more

thoughtful and considerate. I was thankful to know that the poor child had had someone with her who really loved and sympathized."

There was a tense silence. The pathos of Claudia's fate lay heavy upon those who remembered her in the flush of her youthful triumph, and with that other name, too, was the connection of tragedy.

"And Meriel! Meriel wished for happiness," Francis Manning said slowly. "She was shipwrecked, wasn't she, when she was sailing to India with some friends?"

"With Geoffrey Sterne and his wife," Val Lessing told him. "My sister kept up a correspondence with her for some years, and I heard from her. They had both been at school with Mrs. Sterne. She appeared to lose her health after the marriage, but while Meriel was paying her first visit it was discovered that the real trouble was—drink! There's no harm speaking of it now, for later on it became public property, but at the time they hoped for a cure, and the great object was to let no one suspect. She was fond of Meriel and begged her to stay on, in the place of a hired nurse, and Meriel was a lonely creature. She told my sister that she was thankful to find someone who needed her. But she had a hard time. All the

trouble, and isolation, and patience, and—*nastiness*, for nothing! It was a hopeless case, and grew steadily worse and worse. Meriel left off writing during that time, but my sister said that even before that her letters had grown awfully sad. . . . Then they sailed for India, I suppose to try what the change would do, and there was a collision. Some of the passengers got away in boats and were saved—Meriel refused to leave. Some of the passengers told how they had seen Sterne trying to persuade her; but she would not leave."

There was another silence. With one accord the guests looked at Mrs. Ingram, and she recognized the meaning of that look, shook her head, and held out her hands with a gesture of helplessness.

"You are thinking that my theory has failed, and that Meriel found none of the happiness for which she longed. Yes! it sounds like it. Her youth spent in isolation, with a drunken woman as companion, and the result of it all—failure! I don't deny it, dear people. I don't argue. On the surface it's a pitiful tale, but we know only the surface. No one can read the secrets of Meriel's heart. She was happy in one thing, at least—that the time of her loneliness was short,

and I think there are none among you who will deny that Meriel is happy *now*. Whatever may be your creeds, you will agree that such brave, unselfish giving is a garnering of wealth for the life that is to come. We may be satisfied that Meriel has come into her kingdom!" She paused just for a moment, then with a challenging smile turned towards Val Lessing, who sat on her right. The conversation had taken a pensive turn, and with the generalship of a born hostess she was ready to switch it back into a livelier channel. Among all the couples who were present none looked more absolutely sane and satisfied than Val and his wife. Val could obviously be trusted to give a cheerful report.

"Well, Val, what have you to tell us? Was fate kind or unkind enough to lead you through any perilous seas before you reached your present very sunshiny haven?"

Val bent his head in acknowledgment of the compliment. There was a tinge of embarrassment on his face; he glanced across the hearth at his wife, and as quickly averted his eyes.

"W—e—ll! he said slowly, "I think I may say that it *was!* I had an experience of er—what appeared at the time to be a very—er—acute danger. It lasted for some four or five weeks, and

then was—er—relieved in a somewhat remarkable manner. You will excuse the details. I have only to confess that the experience taught me the most useful lesson of my life—to appreciate the blessings of safety! I don't deny that in the course of that experience there were moments of excitement which I intensely enjoyed, but on the whole I discovered that it is much more agreeable to live in peace." He paused for a moment, and into his eyes there leaped a delightful smile. "I may add," he said dryly, "that my wife has relieved me of one great dread. She is good enough to provide a spice of uncertainty, which makes it impossible that I shall ever have to complain of monotony in life!"

Everyone looked at Delia, and Delia flicked her long eyelashes, and stared into space with an expression of angelic innocence. But a dimple dipped in her cheek. Delia at thirty-eight was still a minx. There was more than one man in the room who envied Lessing the possession of his delightful wife!

The general laugh subsided, and Mrs. Ingram turned to the Squire's wife.

"So much for Danger!" she said smiling. "Now, Juliet, what have you to report of Adventure? Your friends will remember how im-

patiently you were straining at your bonds. Has the adventure really come along?"

More than one of the listeners felt it an effort at that moment to repress a smile, so exceedingly unadventurous was the appearance of the portly dame. Perhaps she felt the covert amusement, for there was a note of defiance in her voice as she took up the challenge.

"Yes, it *did*," she said emphatically. "It most certainly did, and I have to thank you, dear Mrs. Ingram, for making me—er—*receptive*—so that when the opportunity arose, I was ready to take it. Before our talk here fifteen years ago, I had drifted into the belief that nothing adventurous or interesting could ever happen to me, and that I must just resign myself to be bored. After that I changed my way of thinking, and expected the chance to come. I am like Mr. Lessing—I prefer not to give you any details, but I think I am quite safe in saying that no other woman ever met her husband in the extraordinary circumstances under which I met mine. It was very adventurous indeed, and we were engaged—oh, at once, and married in a month, and after my husband's service abroad we settled down in the dear old house where we are still living with our six children." She paused, and looked around with

a warning air. "Please don't murmur sympathetically! Whenever I say 'six,' people always murmur sympathetically, and it's so misplaced. It's just what we wanted—*lots* of little heads round the table. Five sturdy boys, and one little girl."

"Well, at any rate, you can't have much adventure now!" It was Mrs. Francis Manning who spoke, the faint Cockney twang of her voice sounding discordantly in contrast to the cultured tones of her companions. "Children are such a tie. We have four, and I never seem to have a free hour. And to live in the country, too. It's a good thing you had some adventure when you were young, for there's no chance of it now."

"I deny it!" cried Juliet, hotly. "I deny it. Can anything in the world be more adventurous than to start a new home, and a new generation, to have six young lives entrusted to one to train for the world's service? Think what those six lives may mean, multiplying into fresh lives, spreading influence wherever they go! There are no such adventures in life, as marriage and parentship, if one can only see them in the right light, and keep on seeing. . . ." She gave a little laugh, half shy, half apologetic, a trifle ashamed of her own intensity. "Ah, well! it's adventur-

ous enough to have a pack of boys who are learning to ride, learning to shoot, trying to copy everything that their father can do to-day, hobbling home almost every day of the week with cuts and bruises, and breaks and sprains. I have all the adventure that I need, and,—what shall I say? Only this, that I enjoy it even more than I expected!"

She stopped, panting, and her husband smiled at her across the room, and silently clapped his hands. "I beg to second the motion!" he said gravely, and there was a general stir of laughter. It was pleasant to meet a couple of the good old-fashioned type which was yearly becoming more rare. Every person in the room felt a sincere respect for Captain and Mrs. Antony Maplestone.

"Well, of course—if you put it like that," said Mrs. Manning doubtfully, "I'm sure I've always done my best to be a good mother, and the girls go to school now, which makes it easier, but with the boy being blind—well, naturally, it's a tie! My husband tells me he wished for Comfort, and there's no doubt but he's got it. We're not rich, of course, but comfortable, quite comfortable. He's only to express a wish, and it's there for him, and I keep a first-rate cook. But as I said to him only to-day, he doesn't give himself a chance.

Always slaving and worrying for someone else, particularly for the boy, even now when he is getting quite big, and able to do for himself. It's wonderful how clever blind people become! Of course we all want to be helpful, but, as I say, there *is* a medium course, and everyone notices how Frank has altered these last years. If you remember he used to be quite stout——"

"Please, Marion! Spare my blushes. I am perfectly well, and my greatest pleasure is looking after the boy." Francis Manning spoke with quiet self-possession, nevertheless his hearers divined a hidden wound, and unanimously forbore from comment, but those who had known the man fifteen years before, marvelled at the change which had come over his whole personality. It was more than a change; it was a transfiguration. What trumpet-call had sounded in this man's ears to rouse him from his sleep?

Mrs. Ingram looked around and met the glance of John Malham, millionaire, leaning back in his chair with his head supported on his hand. Of all the men in the room he looked the most worn and exhausted, and she wondered if perchance at this very moment his tired brain was evolving another Titan scheme by which fresh coffers could

be added to his store. Her smile had more of pity than envy as she addressed him:

"Mr. Malham, it is unnecessary to ask your report! All the world knows how you have succeeded. It only remains for your old friends to congratulate you, and wish you a continuance of your success."

"Thanks very much, Mrs. Ingram. It is a great pleasure to be here, and to meet you all again. I only wish I could have managed to make a longer stay."

Malham was obviously ill at ease, obviously annoyed when his wife took up the strain, and in her flat voice proceeded to enlarge on her husband's marvellous powers. With the obvious intention of avoiding the ordeal he bent forward towards Juliet, and pointing to a miniature which hung from her neck, said in a low voice, "Is that one of the six? The little girl? May I see?"

Juliet beamed broadly as she held out the pearl-rimmed case containing a pretty round young face. "And you? How many have you?"

"None," he said shortly, and Juliet hurried to retrieve her mistake.

"Yes. That's the girl. A great pet, of course. I called her Celia. Her father thought it too fanciful, but he had had his own way about the

boys, so I insisted on it. It's such a pretty name, so sweet and winsome—don't you think so? And uncommon. One meets so many Gladyses and Phyllises, but so seldom a Celia. Did you ever know a Celia?"

She looked at him, and the motherly smile faded at sight of his tortured face.

"Yes. I knew a Celia," he said thickly, and Juliet looked hurriedly in another direction, her heart leaping to a swift conclusion.

"He loved a girl called Celia, and she died, and he married Lady Anne for her position. All his success has not brought him happiness. Oh, the poor, *poor* man!"

Meantime Lady Anne's voice had trailed into silence, and Rupert Dempster was answering Mrs. Ingram's unspoken summons. Like Manning he had but little to say, but there was all the difference in the world in his manner of saying it.

"I wished for Eve," he said simply. "Here she is!" and again he slipped his hand through his wife's arm. As a matter of course he had seated himself by her side; as a matter of course Eve had looked for his coming. For all their friendliness and courtesy, there was about these two an air of detachment from their surroundings, an air of living apart in a world of their own, fenced

round with an ambuscade through which no darts could pass. The affectionate camaraderie of the Lessings and Maplestones was a good and pleasant thing to witness, but the bond which bound these two was finer, more exalted.

Eve's eyes were deep and luminous at that moment, but their beautiful glance held no remembrance of her companions. All her thought was for her man.

"Ah, Rupert, yes! you have gained your wish!" Mrs. Ingram said deeply. She looked at the two as they sat side by side, and a reflection of their own radiance showed in her own face. "It was a great wish," she said, "a wish that was worth while, for your treasure can never be taken away. Death itself is powerless to divide your souls. Dear Rupert, I am glad for you. We are all glad! It is good to have you among us to-day. . . ."

Hereward Lowther bent forward in his seat, the firelight playing on his eager, animated face. Throughout the evening he had worn an air of expectancy, and now he burst eagerly into speech.

"Mrs. Ingram, I have to thank you for a tremendously interesting evening. My wife told me that she had a special reason for wishing to accept your invitation. I understood that we were to celebrate some sort of anniversary, but

as old friends you will remember that she is chary of words, and I was entirely ignorant of its nature. I have been intensely interested in the history of the various wishes, but I confess that my chief feeling has been curiosity. Please tell me! What was my wife's wish?"

Mrs. Ingram looked at the corner by the fireplace where for the last hour a white figure sat, silent, immovable, her face shadowed by an outstanding beam. Even so fifteen years ago had the girl Lilith Wastneys watched and waited, until at her hostess's summons she had moved softly forward to make her extraordinary pronouncement. The remembrance of that moment was vivid in the minds of her old friends, as Mrs. Ingram answered:

"Lilith," she said deliberately, "wished for Power."

The next moment the silence was broken by a peal of laughter. It was Hereward Lowther who laughed, giving way to a gust of amusement with the boy-like unrestraint which still characterized his moods. He threw back his head, he clasped his knees, he opened his mouth and let the loud ha-ha's echo through the hall. In a very paroxysm of amusement he repeated the word, over and again, and between each repetition, swayed with fresh laughter.

"Power! Lilith? Lilith wished for Power? Of all the inexplicable wishes! I might have guessed for months but I should never have guessed that. Lilith? the most humble and retiring of women. Look at her now! That's where she would always be, if she were not driven forward,—hiding in some out-of-the-way corner. And you tell me that she wished for *Power*? When was that—fifteen years ago? And we have been married for twelve. . . . How extraordinarily she must have changed!"

Through eight different minds the reflection was passing, how extraordinarily Lilith remained the same, but it did not become mere friends to contradict the verdict of a husband, so they remained silent, and, his outburst of amusement over, Hereward Lowther vouchsafed a more serious attention to the problem.

"Well!" he said thoughtfully, "we may say that vicariously she has gained her wish. As my wife—" He checked himself as though fearful of seeming to boast, and added quickly, "I should be delighted to feel that I have been able to provide Lilith with anything for which she wished!"

Lilith bent forward and sent him a smile of acknowledgment. Then her eyes travelled round the circle and rested on her hostess's face. The

two women looked at one another long and steadily and a flush rose into Mrs. Ingram's cheeks."

"I think," she said quietly, "I must reckon Lilith among my successes. Mr. Lowther, may I tell you how proud my husband and I feel to number you among our guests to-night? Ordinary people who can only stand by and watch feel a profound gratitude to workers like yourself, who are types of all that is honourable and disinterested. England owes you a great debt to-day."

Every man present joined in a murmur of assent, for though political opinions differed, one and all acknowledged the singleness of Lowther's aim. Across one or two minds flitted a remembrance of the tragic eclipse which had marked the statesman's early career, but in each case the remembrance brought with it an increased admiration. Not one man in a thousand would have had the power to climb out of so deep a ditch!

And now, one by one, the nine histories had been discussed, and the company instinctively drew their chairs nearer the fire, watching with questioning eagerness the eloquent face of the woman whose words had had so large a bearing on their lives. Here she was, an old woman now, worn to the point of breaking, yet vital, as ever, with the flame of an encompassing sympathy.

"Ah, dear people," she sighed, "dear people, it is so good to meet you again! I am so grateful to you for coming. The remembrance of this night will be company for me during many quiet days. I shall have much to think over, but at present I am conscious only of one thing—that my prophecy is true, is almost *terribly* true! We are only faintly beginning to understand the real power of steady, concentrated will. The thing that a man aims for, with a strong, single, undeviating aim, that thing, sooner or later, *a man can have!* So much is certain, but I blame myself for not insisting more upon the initial question. *Is it worth while?* Oh, dear people, so often our ambitions are *not* worth while. An aim which is to ride dominant over every call, an aim for which all hindrances are to be cast aside, must needs have a spiritual nature, if it is to satisfy a spiritual being. In the days to come, teach your children the importance of this great decision; teach them their power, but be sure, be very sure, to teach them to think long and earnestly, lest in their blindness they choose the dross, and go starving all their days!"

John Malham leaned back in his chair, so that his face was in the shadow. Francis Manning's eyes gazed deeply into space. Across the silence

broke the harp-like tones of Eve Dempster's voice:

"Mrs. Ingram, you have gained your own wish. It is written in your face that it was worth while. Will you tell us what it was?"

The hostess looked down at her thin, locked hands. Her voice trembled, as she slowly recited her answer, dwelling with eloquent emphasis on one of the earlier words:

"I have—LEARNED—in whatever state I am, therewith to be Content!"

THE END

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